This book is an extraordinary and provocative examination of one of the great unsolved mysteries: who, or what, was Jesus? The Gospels provide no direct answers, and both the life of Jesus as it has been recorded for us and the teachings and activities of the Apostles are surrounded by baffling contradictions and inconsistencies.

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No reader can fail to be carried along by the tantalising search for clues as Salibi attempts to unravel history's best-kept secret – the true identity of Jesus.

Kamal Salibi is a leading historian of the Middle East. As a practising Christian, he has a keen interest in Biblical studies and is the author of the highly acclaimed history of Lebanon, *A House of Many Mansions*, and *The Modern History of Jordan* (both I.B.Tauris).

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WHO WAS JESUS?

Conspiracy in Jerusalem

KAMAL SALIBI



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The mind has a thousand eyes
And the heart but one

F.W. Bourdillon

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Introduction

LME me invite you to participate in an attempt to resolve one of the most elusive of historical mysteries: the Jesus question.

This question concerns the historical reality of Jesus. That he existed, scholars are in no doubt: there is enough evidence outside the Christian scriptures. But the Gospels, which were written many years after Jesus' death, give accounts of his life that contradict each other. The figure of Christ they depict is inconsistent and even barely coherent. And their description of Jesus' life is notably incomplete. The aim of the Gospel writers was to show that Jesus was the expected Israelite Messiah, rather than to write a biography. We must assume that there are reasons for this inconsistency, contradiction and lack of coherence, and that the silences can be explained.

But first I must present you with my credentials. I am not a specialist in New Testament scholarship, but a teacher and historian with some experience in research. In our discipline, we are trained to read texts, sentence by sentence and word by word, to determine exactly what they say and imply. When we want to research a particular subject, the first thing we do is read the basic texts in this way. Then we begin to make preliminary assumptions, visualizing different possibilities and trying to relate them to one another, to discover which ones fit together best. Next, we form a hypothesis: a proposition or set of propositions which are provisional and help to guide us in our investigation. To discover whether or not our hypothesis is valid, we proceed to search for evidence that may support it. If we fail to find such evidence, we drop the hypothesis and try another.

If all the hypotheses we can think of fail, we give up the

search and turn to another subject. On the other hand, if we do find enough evidence to support a given hypothesis, no matter how absurd it may seem at first glance, we go ahead and examine and cross-examine this evidence until we are satisfied with its accuracy. We then move further forward to develop our hypothesis into a theory: a coherent explanation for our findings which stands to reason, but whose status is still conjectural - that is to say, no more than that of an informed and logical guess.

By its very nature, our discipline cannot be entirely free from speculation in providing interpretations of past situations and events. In some cases, its methods can determine whether or not a particular event actually happened, in instances where the event in question has left traces by which it can be detected: for example, if there are enough independent witnesses to the event on a given occasion, whether those witnesses are living persons or records of one kind or another. By the same token, a historian may be able to determine more or less how the particular event occurred. The matter becomes different, however, when one attempts to relate one event to another in a given situation, and provide explanations. From this point on, any informed and logical guess can only stand on its merits, and different theories on the same subject may be equally valid.

Before beginning our investigation, therefore, it must be clear in our minds that our search may lead us to conclusions of varying degrees of probability. The final product will still be no more than a theory which may convince some people but not others. Moreover, we must not advance any theory unless we ourselves are satisfied that it contains enough truth and logic to make it plausible. Having agreed on this point, we can proceed to determine what materials we are going to use in the search we intend to undertake.

What I have with me are three English versions of the Christian Bible with its Old and New Testaments. One is the Authorized Version (AV) which dates from the reign of James I of England (1603-1625), and is sometimes called the King James Version; another is the Revised Standard Version (RSV); and the third is a version called the *Good News* Bible (GNB), of which the New Testament was first published by

the American Bible Society in 1966, and the Old Testament in 1976. While the AV and RSV renderings of the Bible texts from their original languages into English are the closest to being literal translations, the GNB, like other modern-English versions, takes many liberties with the original, but is easier to read. Unless otherwise indicated, all my quotations will be from the GNB. To be safe, however, I also have the Old Testament with me in its original Hebrew, and the New Testament in its original Greek. Before daring to invite you to join me in this venture, I acquainted myself with the available scholarly literature on the New Testament which is extremely interesting, but I shall bother you with it as little as possible.

To begin with, however, it is necessary to have some basic information about the texts. The New Testament is the Christian scriptures, originally written in Greek, which have been added to the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament to form the Christian Bible. These Christian scriptures comprise four accounts of the career of Jesus called the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), and a report of the activity and preaching of the early followers of Jesus, which is called Acts of the Apostles (usually referred to as Acts). More will be said about these five books in due course. In addition, there are the Epistles - a selection from the surviving correspondence of various apostles, mainly concerned with religious instruction. The New Testament contains twenty-one epistles, thirteen of them attributed to Paul, the man generally reckoned to have been the founder of Christianity. Finally, there is a book of eschatological prophecy called Revelation. Of these texts, the ones to which we shall limit our concern are the four Gospels, Acts and the epistles of Paul.

The Old Testament - or the Hebrew Bible - is composed of three categories of scriptures. First are the five books of 'Instruction', called the Torah, and traditionally attributed to Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deutero-nomy). Next are the twenty-one books of the 'Prophets'. Six of these are basically historical chronicles (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings); the others are records of the oracles of three 'major' prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), and twelve 'minor' ones (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah,

Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi). Finally, there are the thirteen books called the 'Writings' (Ruth, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel). Of the Writings, two books are exceptional in the Hebrew Bible because they include long passages in Aramaic (Daniel 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18). While the five books of the Torah are taken to represent the original monotheism of the Biblical Israelites, and remain the sole scriptures accepted by surviving Israelite communities such as the Samaritans, the Torah, Prophets and Writings, together, form the scriptures of the evolved form of the original Israelite monotheism, which we know as Judaism. In addition to the Hebrew Bible, Judaism accepts the authority of a corpus of interpretations of the Torah and other traditional Jewish teachings written down in the early centuries of the Christian era, and collectively known as the Talmud.

My interest in investigating the New Testament developed out of an earlier historical interest in the Hebrew Bible. The careful study of its texts convinced me that the history of the Israelites, which it relates, had nothing to do with Palestine, as traditionally believed, but actually belongs to the West Arabian provinces of the Hijaz and Asir, bordering the Red Sea. The evidence that led me to this conclusion is elaborated in two books: *The Bible Came from Arabia* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1985; Pan Books, 1987); and *Secrets of the Bible People* (London, Saqi Books, 1988). My proposition elicited angry responses and indignant condemnations from Old Testament specialists. However, none of these scholars has so far advanced a single item of direct or even circumstantial evidence to prove me wrong. So I remain convinced that the historical Israelites of the Bible were not a Palestinian, but a West Arabian people, which is what Arabian folk tradition and the early Arabic literature of Islam strongly suggests that they were. Without being prepared to entertain the possibility that the Biblical Israelites were an Arabian rather than a Palestinian people, bearing in mind at the same time that this proposition may be wrong, there would be no point in joining me in the present investigation. In any serious

historical inquiry, one must do what a good coroner does: listen to all the gossip, but start the actual cross-examination from a clean slate.

What we have on hand is a mystery: who was the Jesus of Paul and the Gospels? One may even ask, what was he? The first thing we have to do is define the nature of the problem involved. Next, we have to search for a clue to the mystery, picking up the thread of the truth and following it wherever it may lead. This means that we have to place Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Paul in the witness stand and subject them to the most rigorous cross-examination.

If, like me you are a Christian, you will have to be certain of the strength of your religious conviction before you join me in this inquiry. You will have to muster all your courage to face historical possibilities which may prove disturbing. There are likely to be dangerous avenues ahead. We may discover strange skeletons in secret closets whose existence we never suspected, and must prepare ourselves not to recoil at their sight. In many instances, we will have to put religious conviction temporarily aside to be able to call things by their names. If we do not proceed soberly and with due circumspection, we may find ourselves starting out from a fool's paradise to end up in a fool's hell. Should you happen not to be a Christian, or if you are a person who holds negative views about religion, you must be advised from the very beginning that our venture is concerned only with examining the historical mystery of the Gospels and the birth of Christianity. We are not out to expose any scandal, or to prove Christian belief false.

If you should have the advantage over me by being yourself a specialist in New Testament criticism, you may nnd the method on which the present investigation will proceed banal in certain ways, and unconventional to the point of being bizarre in others. It is quite possible, indeed, that you will be tempted to dismiss the author as a pretentious crank, undertaking the present work mainly for sensation. Should you be tempted to do so, please first stop to ask yourself how certain you and other scholars in your specialist field are of the validity of any of the historical explanations regarding the Jesus question which have been advanced. A considerable

assortment of theories on the subject have been proposed since the earliest days of New Testament criticism, yet none has so far gained general acceptance as being truly convincing. Even the theories which have produced the most convergence of learned opinion remain no more than tentative speculation. Certainly, the scholarly literature in your field supports this view.

One other matter, however, remains to be kept in mind. Though the mind has a thousand eyes, the vision of the heart's single eye turns out in the end to be the more accurate and meaningful. Yet, the mind's thousand eyes remain there to be used. To give them the full opportunity to see things in their own way without obstruction or intervention, we shall request the heart's eye to look in another direction, only for the time being, without denying or in any way challenging the validity of its special vision. Moreover, in the final analysis, we must be ready to concede that our intellectual inquiry, being purely historical, has limits beyond which it cannot go.

1 The Problem

BETWEEN AD 27 and 36, when a certain Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea in Roman Palestine, a man called Jesus arrived with a small band of followers in the Jewish holy city of Jerusalem. The story is told that as he entered the city, a party of local people flocked to greet him as the 'son of David' - a descendant of the ancient Israelite royal line of Judah, with a claim to the historical Israelite crown. Immediately, there followed a disturbance in the Jerusalem temple in which this Jesus was somehow involved. Shortly afterwards he was arrested and brought for questioning, first before the local Jewish religious authorities, then before Pilate. Under pressure from a hostile Jewish mob crying out for his blood, he was condemned to die on the cross.

His followers, however, who are called the 'apostles' (meaning 'messengers'), claimed that he rose from the grave three days after his execution, after which he ascended to heaven. Led by a brother of Jesus called James, and two other men called Simon Cephas (or Peter) and John, these apostles braved persecution and remained in Jerusalem, where they became the founders of a new religious sect. They preached that Jesus was the promised Israelite Messiah, or Christ.

Some years later, perhaps in AD 40, a man called Paul appeared on the scene. He was a Jew, apparently living in Damascus, the capital of present-day Syria (see pp. 16-17). As a strict Pharisee, or upholder of Jewish religious traditions, Paul was originally an ardent persecutor of the followers of Jesus. Then he saw a vision which convinced him that this man, whom he had probably never met personally, was the one and only Christ and the Son of God, whose earthly mission was immeasurably more important than the career of Moses and the Israelite law. The same vision also convinced

Paul that he should himself become an apostle of 'Jesus Christ' (as he began to call him).

The message Paul preached throughout the Roman world was an interpretation of the Jesus cult which differed from the one preached in Jerusalem by the original apostles. For example, while James, Peter, John and their party considered it essential that Gentiles (Biblical Hebrew *goyim,* 'nations', meaning non-Israelites, and by extension non-Jews) seeking conversion to their faith must first be circumcised in accordance with the law of Moses, and required to observe this law, Paul maintained that Gentiles could convert to the faith without being subjected to circumcision, and also without being enjoined to obey the Israelite law. In his view, faith in the risen Christ was all that mattered.

For the duration of Paul's life, his preaching clashed with that of the Jerusalem apostles, and the religious issue between the two sides remained unsettled, despite attempts at agreement. It was apparently the followers of Paul who first called themselves 'Christians' - reportedly in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The original followers of Jesus in Jerusalem used to be called 'Nazarenes', referring to their special faith or cult as 'the Way' *(hodos* in the original Greek of the Christian scriptures).

In AD 62, James, the brother of Jesus, was put to death in Jerusalem by the order of the Je./ish high priest - according to the near-contemporary Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (AD C.37-C.100), by stoning. Paul probably died shortly after, presumably in Rome. Next, in AD 70, Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans. Later, in 135, the Jewish community there, along with the Israelite and Gentile followers of the Nazarene Way, were forcibly dispersed. Christianity, however, as preached by Paul and his party, survived in the rest of the Roman world.

Perhaps for this reason, the earliest known writings speaking of the earthly career of Jesus were not those of the original apostles of Jerusalem, but Paul's 'epistles' – his letters, written in the *koine dialektos* (the cosmopolitan Greek of the Hellenistic period), to associates in the new faith, or to emerging Christian communities in different places. Among Paul's epistles, those addressed to the church in Galatia

(today in Turkey), and to the church in Corinth (today in Greece), are generally regarded by scholars as authentic. It is also commonly accepted that the epistle to the Israelite and Gentile Christians of Rome is Paul's own work. There are some doubts as to whether or not Paul actually wrote the other epistles which bear his name. The most serious relate to the two addressed to Timothy, and the one to Titus, which most modern scholars do not regard as authentic. It is commonly conceded, however, that even these unauthentic epistles probably preserve fragments of Paul's own writings. In any case, one may safely assume that their contents – particularly in the autobiographical passages – do reflect what Paul himself knew and preached, even though it was not he who wrote them.

The surviving epistles of Paul appear to date from the fourteenth year of his preaching career, and some were written from prison. It was as a prisoner that he addressed the church of Philippi (today in Greece), hinting that he was awaiting his possible execution (2:17). The hint to this effect is even stronger in the second epistle addressed to Timothy (4:6-8). Regardless of whether or not Paul was actually executed, nothing is known about him after about AD 62. It is generally assumed that he was put to death in Rome in the course of the Christian persecutions which marked the reign of the Roman emperor Nero (AD 54-68).

By the estimates which are commonly accepted today, the earliest surviving accounts of the earthly mission of Jesus – the four Gospels included in the Christian scriptures called the New Testament - were compiled and redacted in the latter decades of the first century AD, starting from the time when Paul was nearing the end of his career, or shortly after. These 'canonical' Gospels, also written in the koine Greek of the period, probably relate a number of traditions about Jesus which derive from the preaching of the Jerusalem apostles, who were his contemporaries and personal associates. Two of them (Matthew and John) carry the names of apostles who were companions of Jesus; the two others (Mark and Luke) are called after later apostles who were companions of Paul, the second his personal physician (Colossians 4:14). In addition to the four 'canonical' Gospels, whose contents are

regarded by Christian church tradition as authentic, there are a number of others – all of them of later authorship – which have long been rejected as 'apocryphal', or of doubtful authority.

That there were Christian scriptures which are older than the canonical Gospels is virtually certain, although many New Testament scholars today prefer to speak of the Gospel sources more cautiously and ambiguously as 'traditions'. Most of these pre-Gospel Christian scriptures must have been written not in Greek but in Aramaic, the native language of Jesus and his disciples. Paul occasionally mentioned such scriptures and sometimes quoted from them in his epistles, as he also quoted from the regular Israelite scriptures. Indeed, in one epistle, he referred to his 'books . . . and especially the ones made of parchment' (2 Timothy 4:13). Some of these books were perhaps the sources of his Christian scriptural quotations – sources which no longer exist. So far, the search for lost Gospel materials has only been successful in retrieving Christian writings which are of later composition than the canonical Gospels. These works shed much light on the numerous heresies which appeared in the Christian world starting from the first century AD, but contribute very little to the understanding of the career of Jesus as history.

Thus, barring a small amount of material from non-Christian sources, to which reference will be made in due course, the search for the historical Jesus has so far been dependent almost entirely on the canonical Gospels – none of which is an eye-witness account – and on the occasional references made by Paul.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul identified himself unequivocally as a 'Hebrew', an 'Israelite' and a 'descendant of Abraham' (11:22). In Philippians, he repeated that he was circumcised when he was a week old and that he was trained as a Pharisee, being ' an Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a pure-blooded Hebrew' (3:5). Just as unequivocally, Paul considered the historical Jesus a fellow Hebrew (Romans 9:5) and Israelite (Galatians 4:4) of the tribe of Judah – in fact, a scion of the royal house of Judah: 'as to his humanity, he was born a descendant of David' (Romans 1:3; cf. 2 Timothy 2:8). Because he assumed that everybody had 'certainly heard about him'

(Ephesians 4:21), Paul made little allusion to the career of Jesus as a man. In the surviving epistles, no reference is made to Jesus' father, and in the one instance where his mother is mentioned (Galatians 4:4) she is left unnamed.

On the other hand, Paul seems to hint in two instances that Jesus was originally a man of wealth commensurate with his royal descent and therefore special social standing. 'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,' he wrote; 'rich (Greek *plousios)* as he was, he made himself poor for your sake, in order to make you rich by means of his poverty' (2 Corinthians 8:9). 'Of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant' (Philippians 2:5). Traditionally, the original wealth of Jesus, as spoken of by Paul, has been interpreted symbolically as a reference to his special spiritual standing. The Gospels, unlike Paul, nowhere specify that Jesus was originally rich. Yet they do attribute to him sayings about the 'poor' (Greek *ptochos)* which clearly imply that he regarded them as a caste for which he felt special sympathy and concern, but to which he did not personally belong. Thus, the Gospels do suggest, indirectly, that Jesus was a person of some social and economic standing. Concerning his teachings Paul - unlike the Gospels - only mentioned the one relating to the event Christians call the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-5):

> For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me.' In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup and said, 'This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me.'

Of the fact that the historical Jesus was put to death by crucifixion after he was somehow 'betrayed' (strictly 'handed over', the Greek verb used being *paradidomi,* 'hand over'), Paul had no doubt: 'Before your very eyes you had a clear description of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross' (Galatians 3:1). He referred to the event in nearly all his writings, and in one case accused the Jews of having been the

party directly responsible for the man's death (Thessalonians 2:14), a fact which the authoritative and near-contemporary Jewish historian Josephus plainly confirms. In one of the epistles to Timothy, Paul further refers to the trial of Jesus before Pilate: 'Jesus Christ. . . firmly professed his faith before Pontius Pilate' (1 Timothy 6:13). Paul, moreover, was no less convinced than the older apostles that Jesus was raised by God from the dead (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:3-8):

> 1 passed on to you what I received, which is of the greatest importance: that Christ died for our sins . . . that he was buried and that he was raised to life three days later. . . that he appeared to Peter and then to all twelve apostles. Then he appeared to more than five hundred of his followers at once, most of whom are still alive, although some have died. Then he appeared to James, and afterwards to all the apostles. Last of all he appeared also to me.

Having himself only recognized Jesus as the resurrected Christ in 'revelation' and 'vision', Paul must have assumed that the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to his older apostles and followers was also in visions. Of his own mystical experience of the risen Christ, he said the' following (2 Corinthians 12:1-4):

> I will now talk about visions and revelations given me by the Lord. I know a certain Christian man who fourteen years ago was snatched up to the highest heaven (I do not know whether this actually happened or whether he had a vision – only God knows). I repeat, I know that this man was snatched to Paradise (again, I do not know whether this actually happened or whether it was a vision – only God knows), and there he heard things which cannot be put into words, things that human lips may not speak.

While Paul apparently never knew the historical Jesus (had he known him, he would probably have made a point of saying so), he did have a direct acquaintance with 'James, the Lord's brother' (Galatians 1:19), whom he met at least twice in Jerusalem (the reference to the second meeting is in

Galatians 2:9). This means that Paul was personally convinced of the historicity of Jesus, who was his contemporary although their paths, it seems, never crossed. On the other hand, Paul appears not to have given much credit to the stories which were circulated in his time about Jesus, probably by the apostles in Jerusalem; and while he did recognize the man as belonging to the royal house of David, he did not accept the different genealogies attributed to him: 'Tell them to give up those legends and those long lists of ancestors, which only produce arguments' (1 Timothy 1:4); 'Avoid stupid arguments, long lists of ancestors . . . they are useless and worthless' (Titus 3:9). This indicates that Paul was sceptical about the sort of genealogies given to Jesus which survive in the Gospels of Matthew (1:1-17) and Luke (3:23-38). It also suggests that he considered at least some of the Jesus stories which survive in the different Gospels as being no more than legends.

In the writings of Paul himself, however, the historical Jesus emerges as a shadowy figure, reduced to relative unimportance by Paul's own vision of Jesus as the living Christ. In the earthly career of Jesus, he appears to have regarded only his death and resurrection as being especially significant. Of the essence of Jesus as the Christ of all time, rather than the historical figure belonging to a particular period, he says (Colossians 1:15-22):

> Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the first-born Son, superior to all created things . .. Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place ... He is the first-born Son, who was raised from death, in order that he alone might have the first place in all things ... his Son's death on the cross . . . the physical death of his Son . . .

Certainly, Paul's Christ, as the man Jesus, did historically exist. What proves this beyond doubt is the fact that Paul repeatedly met and quarrelled with his brother in Jerusalem. At this point, however, the certainty ends, and what is left is the outstanding problem: who was the historical Jesus? Where did he come from? What was the actual nature of his

public career? What made his followers accept him as the Messiah, or Christ, whose coming was prophesied in the Israelite scriptures? Considering that the chief witness to the fact that he existed was Paul, we may begin by asking the question: how much do we really know about Paul?

While scholars have long subjected the parts of the New Testament which speak of the life and career of Jesus to the closest scrutiny,* they have not been as critical of the parts which speak of Paul, where the information presented has normally been accepted at face value. There is certainly no reason to doubt the information about his career which Paul himself gives in his epistles: that he was a Jew and Pharisee, and a Hebrew Israelite claiming to belong to the tribe of Benjamin (see above); that he had an unusual facility for languages (1 Corinthians 14:18), including the Greek in which he wrote; that he was a persecutor of the followers of Jesus before his conversion (1 Corinthians 15:9); that he lived or at least started his Christian religious mission in Damascus (Galatians 1:17), which he finally fled to escape arrest by the man appointed to govern the city by Aretas, the Nabatean Arab king of Petra (today in Jordan) (2 Corinthians 11:32-3). In his writings, Paul made other short references to his apostolic career. In the most informative of these he said (2 Corinthians 11:24-8):

> Five times I was given the thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; three times I was whipped by the Romans; and once I was stoned. I have been in three shipwrecks, and once I spent twenty-four hours in the water. In my many travels I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from fellow-Jews and from Gentiles; there have been dangers in the cities, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas, and dangers from false friends. There has been work and toil; often I have gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter or clothing. And not to mention other things, every day I am under pressure of my concern for all the churches.

* For an acccurate and highly readable summary of the scholarship on this matter, see Ian Wilson, *Jesus: The Evidence* (London, 1985).

The more detailed information about the life and career of Paul, however, comes from the part of the New Testament called Acts of the Apostles, which was evidently written by the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Both Luke and Acts are addressed by whoever wrote them to 'Dear Theophilus' – perhaps 'Dear Lover of God' (i.e. aspirant after the Christian truth), or some actual Theophilus whose historical identity has not been established. And the Gospel of Luke (1:1–4) is introduced in a manner clearly indicating that the events to be narrated there (and also in the book of Acts to follow) were not first-hand information, let alone an eyewitness account:

> Dear Theophilus: Many people have done their best to write a report of the things that have taken place among us. They wrote *what we have been told by those who saw these things from the beginning and who proclaimed the message.* And so . . . because *I have carefully studied all these matters from their beginning,* I thought it would be good to write an *orderly account* for you. I do this so that you will know the full truth about everything which you have been taught.

Whatever the problem may be with the account of the life and career of Jesus presented in Luke, it has long been noted that Acts, despite a fundamental unity of style indicating a single authorship, actually puts together two different categories of information about the career of Paul. The first is indirect information, related as received from its sources, whatever they were. The second is direct information introduced by a writer speaking in the first person plural as 'we', and referring to himself and his party as 'us' (16:10–17ff.; 20:6–21:17ff; 27:2–28:2ff). These 'we-sections' of Acts, as they are called, have something important in common: they are all accounts of the travels of Paul and his companions, which means that they are first-hand accounts of these preaching voyages and can be trusted. There is no conflict between the contents of these passages, and what Paul says about himself in his epistles. The same is not always true of the other parts of Acts, which are narrated at second hand. How, when and why these two different textual components of

Acts were put together to form a unified account is not a question we need to address here. What is important to remember, for the present purpose, is that there are at least two different narrative components in Acts: one should be accepted as it stands; the other should be handled with more caution, or even discounted in cases where the information it provides is contradicted by the personal testimony of Paul regarding his own life and career.

In Acts, for example, it is implied that Paul was originally called Saul. It is entirely possible that Paul was also called Saul, Paul being the Greek name by which he was commonly known, and Saul the Hebrew name he was given. In societies where the native culture is overwhelmed by a colonial one, as was the case with Hellenistic (i.e. Seleucid and Roman) Syria, people frequently carry such double names: one of the native tradition, and one of the invading culture which would possibly but not necessarily be a translation of the native name. Two of the disciples of Jesus, Andrew and Philip, are only known from the Gospels by their Greek names. Perhaps they also had Hebrew or Aramaic names (see chapter 7). Andrew's brother, however, whose native name was Simon Cephas (Aramaic *Kifa,* meaning 'the rock'), was also called Peter *(Petros,* the Greek for 'rock'). Yet, it is far from certain that Paul was originally called Saul.

The narrative in Acts begins to speak of Saul (8:1) without any indication that he was also called Paul. Then the switch in the name suddenly occurs without any explanation in the account of the apostle's first preaching voyage: 'Then Saul - also known as Paul [in the original Greek o *kai Paulos,* literally 'the also Paul'] - was filled with the Holy Spirit . . .' (13:9). Furthermore, Acts attributes to Paul the following identification of himself (21:39, then elaborated in 22:3):

> I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up here in Jerusalem as a student of Gamaliel ... in the Law of our ancestors . . .

In the epistles he himself wrote, Paul does not mention Tarsus, in Cilicia (today in southern Turkey), as his place of

birth, nor does he make any personal reference to an early residence in Jerusalem, or to Gamaliel as his instructor in the Jewish law. In Galatians 1:21, he speaks of 'places in .. . Cilicia' which he went to visit three years after the start of his apostolic career, without in any way indicating that he had a home or relatives there. From the information he personally gives about the beginnings of his apostolic career (Galatians 1:17-18), the implication is that he was a resident (perhaps a native) of Damascus and that his visit to Jerusalem three years after his conversion was his first – barring the possibility of an earlier visit or visits on pilgrimage.

Possibly, Acts confuses the identity of Paul with that of another person called Saul who was the student of Gamaliel, and who actually lived in Jerusalem, where he was a Jewish persecutor of the early followers of Jesus – among other things, approving of the 'murder' of Stephen, the first Nazarene martyr in the city (8:1). It is also possible that the use of Saul as Paul's original name was outright invention. Paul himself claimed to belong to the Israelite tribe of Benjamin, and recognized Jesus as a descendant of David. Historically, there was a Saul who was the first king of Israel, and this Saul, like Paul, belonged to the tribe of Benjamin; David, who replaced him on the Israelite throne, belonged to the tribe of Judah. It was perhaps for this reason that the name Saul was assumed to have been the original name of Paul. Acts could have been drawing a subtle parallel between Paul and the historical Saul on the one hand, and between Jesus and David on the other, where it made Paul say in a speech, shortly after the change of his name (Acts 13:20–3):

> [God] gave [the Israelites] judges until the time of the prophet Samuel. And when they asked for a king, God gave them Saul son of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin, to be their king for forty years. After removing him, God made David their king. This is what God said about him: 'I have found that David son of Jesse is the kind of man I like, a man who will do all I want him to do.' It was Jesus, a descendant of David, whom God made the Saviour of the people of Israel, as he had promised.

It is perhaps worth noting here that in the epistles he himself wrote, unlike this speech attributed to him, Paul does not dwell on the Davidic descent of Jesus, but merely mentions it in two instances in a somewhat offhand manner, and both times as a passing reference.

Scholars have generally assumed that the book of Acts was written with a definitely Pauline bias. This is not necessarily true, because the book (as we have already noted) combines information from various sources: most of them indirect accounts of the activities of the different apostles, including Paul, and one of them a direct account of the preaching voyages of Paul, as related by one of his faithful companions. Therefore, it is possible that the bias in Acts, where Paul is concerned, varies with the sources. While the 'we-sections' and the material woven around them are distinctly pro-Pauline in tenor, other parts are, as we shall see, distinctly anti-Pauline, probably reflecting the interests of the party of the original Nazarene apostles of Jerusalem, whose leader appears to have been James.

That this James was the brother of Jesus, there can be no doubt. The Jewish historian Josephus, who was his contemporary, spoke of his execution in Jerusalem in AD 62, identifying him as 'the brother of Jesus called the Christ'. As already indicated, Paul himself met James at least twice in Jerusalem, disagreeing with him on both occasions on certainly one major point of doctrine: whether or not Gentile converts to the new Christian faith should first be circumcised, to become acceptable as Israelites. The book of Acts, in turn, makes several references to James as the Jerusalem apostle who spoke with most authority, and who was apparently deferred to as the leader of the community.

The canonical Christian scriptures, moreover, preserve an epistle attributed to James, the authenticity of which was strongly doubted at one time, but is less so today. As the brother of Jesus, James was probably regarded by the followers of the Nazarene Way in Jerusalem as his legitimate successor. His authority, like that of Jesus, would have derived from the fact that he was a recognized descendant of David. James himself, it appears, was highly conscious of the fact that he had a claim to David's throne. The epistle which

bears his name in the New Testament is addressed 'To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' *(tais dodeka phulais en te diaspora,* James 1:1): clearly an exclusive reference to the people of Israel as the special flock of the house of David, although some modern translations (such as the GNB we are using) freely and incorrectly interpret the original Greek to indicate 'all God's people scattered over the whole world'. In a speech attributed to him in Acts (15:16), James makes a point of quoting the prophet Amos (9:11) where he says:

> After this I will return, says the Lord,
> and restore the kingdom of David.
> I will rebuild its ruins
> and make it strong again.

From the strict Israelite point of view, there was a vast disparity between the legitimate authority of James as a 'son of David', and the dubious authority of the upstart Paul as a man belonging to the historically discredited tribe of Benjamin. The book of Acts was probably hinting at this disparity between the standing of the two men where it made Paul himself indirectly admit it in one of the speeches it attributes to him. In this speech, Paul is made to speak of the replacement of the Benjaminite King Saul on the Israelite throne by David, and also to emphasize that David rather than Saul was the king of Israel who was really favoured by God, because he never wavered in acting on God's bidding. One is left wondering here. Was the historical Jesus no mere religious preacher, but a man of political ambitions, claiming a hereditary right to the lost throne of David? Did his brother James in Jerusalem consider himself, in some way, to be his dynastic successor? Did Paul oppose James and slur over the details of the historical career of Jesus, playing down the question of his Davidic descent and emphasizing his transcendental Christhood instead, because of an inherited Benjaminite distaste for what may have been the dynastic pretensions of the two men as scions of the royal house of Judah?

Paul certainly admitted that Jesus (and therefore also his brother James) were descendants of King David. Whether or not they had a real claim to Davidic descent is irrelevant for

our present purpose; what is important is that there were Israelites who accepted them as having the claim.

To appreciate this point with respect to Israelite society at the time, a parallel may be drawn with historical and contemporary Islamic society, where many families at different times have been accepted as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima who married his first cousin Ali. To this day, such people carry the special title of *Sharif* (meaning 'nobleman') or *Sayyid* (meaning 'lord'), and until the present century special state officials were appointed from among them to make certain that families claiming this title had some right to it. True, officially acknowledged claims of descent from Muhammad were more often than not fraudulent. Nevertheless, the Sharifs and Sayyids in Islamic society have traditionally been recognized as a special caste and sometimes accorded privileges. Among the different Shiite Islamic sects, all of whom agree that the Islamic state can only be legitimate if it is headed by a descendant of the Prophet, Sharifs and Sayyids are held in particular reverence, and the opinion of the learned among them is regarded as being especially authoritative. It is as an accepted descendant of the Prophet that the Aga Khan heads the Ismaili Shiite Muslims today. Until the 1960s, the Zaydi Shiite Imams who held sway in the Yemen claimed their political authority on the same basis. The same was equally true in the case of the Fatimid caliphs who ruled North Africa, then Egypt, between AD 909 and 1171.

At the time when the followers of Jesus first emerged as an Israelite sect under the Jerusalem apostles, it appears that the Israelites had their own Sharifs and Sayyids, as the Muslims do to this day. In the case of the Israelites, they were a special caste with a recognized claim of descent from King David, the true founder of the kingdom of Israel, regardless of whether their claim was correct or incorrect; and there is evidence from the Hebrew Bible, in the books of Ezekiel and Ezra, that they were accorded – certainly at one time – the distinguishing title of *Nasi',* meaning 'prince', or 'chief. Whatever the religious message of Jesus actually was, he was reportedly welcomed upon his arrival in Jerusalem as a 'Son of David', and his descent from David was accepted by Paul as

a fact, although he did not attach to it much importance. Other early Christians, however, appear to have thought differently. After the death of Jesus, they turned for leadership to another 'Son of David' - his brother James.

In Islamic society, Sharifs and Sayyids are rarely paupers. In the cities, they normally belong to the middle or upper classes; in rural areas, they are frequently better off than others. Traditionally, special public funds were reserved to care for the poor among them, coming either from the state coffers or from special religious endowments; and in some Islamic countries the practice continues to the present day in one way or another. More likely than not, the same was once the case with Israelite individuals and families who were accepted as 'Sons of David'. This may explain why Paul described Jesus as originally a rich or at least a well-to-do man who only became a pauper when he gave up his wealth of his own accord to embark on his mission.

Plainly, not much is actually known about the identity of the historical Jesus and the nature of his mission. In the Gospels, the man is depicted as an itinerant preacher, speaking Aramaic, moving with his followers from place to place, and teaching a liberal and highly unconventional interpretation of the Israelite faith. By one estimate, his preaching career, as depicted in the Gospels, can be compressed into three weeks,* beyond which hardly anything about him is adequately explained. Although it has never been doubted that Jesus spent his entire life in Palestine, between Galilee, Judea and the Jordan valley, most of the places mentioned in the New Testament in connection with his career cannot be clearly identified by name in any of these areas, as will subsequently be shown.

That Jesus existed is beyond question. Apart from the epistles of Paul, there is enough historical testimony to this fact from outside the Christian scriptures. Of this matter, we shall have more to say as we proceed with our investigation. For the historian, however, the problem remains. Who was Jesus? Where did he come from? What did he want? Why was he followed, and by whom? Why was he killed? And what

* B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: a Study of Origins* (London, 1927).

kept his followers together after his death? Most important of all, why do the Gospels slur over the major part of his life? It is these questions that we will have to address.

At the present stage of our inquiry, we have noted that what the book of Acts says about Paul is not entirely correct. As we shall discover in the next stage, there are things which Paul says about himself in his own epistles which Acts does not mention, and in some cases flagrantly contradicts. We have also noted what has long been accepted for a fact: that the book of Acts is a continuation of one of the Gospels, that of Luke. Like the other three canonical Gospels, Luke has much to say about the earthly career of Jesus. Paul, however, has little to say on that subject. Why did Paul say one thing about himself, while Acts said something else? Why did the author of Acts, who was also the author of Luke, speak profusely of the life and career of Jesus, as the other Gospel authors did, while Paul said so little about the subject? If these questions can be answered, we may arrive at some clues to help unravel the mystery of the historical Jesus.

2 What Act Does Not Say About Paul

THE Jerusalem apostles did not consider Paul their equal and disapproved of his preaching. They opposed him for seventeen years, and only agreed in the end to recognize him as 'apostle to the Gentiles' because they needed his financial help (Galatians 2:1–10). Paul could secure money for them from the rich churches he had founded in Greece, in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia (Romans 15:25–31), where he organized a special fund-raising campaign calling upon the faithful to 'help . . . God's people in Judaea' (e.g. 2 Corinthians 9:1–15). The goodwill of his fellow apostles who were the old disciples of Jesus had to be bought at a price. Even then, their opposition to him did not entirely cease.

Paul, in his turn, had no regard for the special authority which the Jerusalem apostles claimed for themselves, and considered his own authority to be at least as good as theirs. As far as he was concerned, the only person among them worthy of respect was Simon Cephas, or Peter. The others – and even Peter at times – seemed to him a closed circle of pretentious bigots who made great issue of being full-blooded Hebrews and circumcised Israelites, fussed about food taboos and other details of Israelite law, taught 'legends' about Jesus (perhaps a reference to the miracles they attributed to him), but otherwise had nothing of particular importance to say. He scoffed at the manner in which they tried to impress their followers by uttering sentences in 'strange tongues' without being able to explain what they said (1 Corinthians 4:13). As an intelligent, cultivated man who knew many languages, Paul could easily see through their pretences. Whenever their negative attitude towards his independent preaching reached the point where it aroused his anger, he reacted by saying

exactly what he thought of them (as in 2 Corinthians 11:5, 12–23):

> I do not think that I am the least bit inferior to those very special [Greek *huperlian*] . . . 'apostles'... I will go on doing what I am doing now, in order to keep those other 'apostles' from having any reason for boasting and saying that they work in the same way that we do. Those men are not true apostles – they are false apostles, who lie about their work and disguise themselves to look like real apostles of Christ . . . In the end they will get exactly what their actions deserve . . . Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they Christ's servants? . . . I am a better servant than they are!

In one instance, speaking of his second meeting in Jerusalem with 'James, Peter and John' during the seventeenth year of his ministry, he openly challenged their claim to religious leadership, pointing out that they had really nothing important to say (Galatians 2:6):

> Those who seemed [Greek *dokeo*] to be the leaders – I say this because it makes no difference to me what they were; God does not judge by outward appearances – those leaders, I say, made no new suggestions to me.

He also denounced their religious teachings, where they differed from his own, as worthy of nothing less than outright damnation (Galatians 1:8–9):

> even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel that is different from the one we preached to you, may he be condemned to hell! We have said it before, and now I say it again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel that is different from the one you accepted, may he be condemned to hell!

To Paul, the gospel preached in Jerusalem was 'legend' (Greek *muthos,* 1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7); more specifically, 'Jewish' legend (Titus 1:14). Even if the epistles to Timothy and Titus were not written by Paul, one may accept them as reflecting

his views on this and other matters. The gospel he himself preached, he claimed, was the authentic one, because it was 'not of human origin': 'I did not receive it from any man,' he wrote emphatically, 'nor did anyone teach it to me. It was Jesus Christ himself who revealed it to me' (Galatians 1:11–12).

Regardless of the truth of his claim to a special revelation, Paul was the person who knew best how his own apostolic career commenced; and there were people still living when he wrote of it who would remember the events involved, so he could not fabricate his account without losing the credibility he badly needed as an apostle who had probably never known Jesus personally. For this reason, and because he was an individual opposed by a party that was determined to discredit him, he had to be particularly careful in what he said. Paul's own account tells us that this is how his preaching career began (Galatians 1:15–23):

> God in his grace chose me even before I was born, and called me to serve him. And when he decided to reveal his Son to me, so that I might preach the Good News about him to the Gentiles, *I did not go to anyone for advice, nor did I go to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me. Instead, I went at once to Arabia,* and then I returned to Damascus. *It was three years later* that I went to Jerusalem to obtain information from [Greek *historeo,* literally to 'know'] Peter, and I stayed with him for two weeks. I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother. What I write is true. God knows that I am not lying! Afterwards I went to places in Syria and Cilicia. At that time the members of the churches in Judaea did not know me personally. They knew only *what others were saying.*

Paul had good reason to swear to the truth of what he said here, because the Jerusalem apostles were circulating a different account of the start of his apostolic career – one in which they falsely gave themselves, or at least a man of their party (see below), the major credit for introducing Paul to the new faith. One may safely assume that their story about Paul was none other than the one found in the book of Acts, where

it is claimed that he was originally called Saul (see chapter 1). Here is an abridged version of the story as told three times in Acts, with the events starting not in Damascus, but in Jerusalem (9:1-28, also repeated with minor variations in 21:6ff. and 26:12ff., where they are ascribed to Paul himself in alleged quotation):

> Saul kept up his violent threats of murder against the followers of the Lord. He went to the High Priest and asked for letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he should find there any followers of the Way of the Lord, he would be able to arrest them, both men and women, and bring them back to Jerusalem. As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' he asked. '1 am Jesus, whom you persecute,' the voice said. 'But get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you must do'. . . Saul got up from the ground and opened his eyes, but could not see a thing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. For three days he was not able to see, and during that time he did not eat or drink anything. There was a Christian in Damascus named Ananias . . . So Ananias went, entered the house where Saul was, and placed his hands on him ... At once something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he was able to see again. He stood up and was baptized; and after he had eaten, his strength came back ... He went straight to the synagogues and began to preach that Jesus was the Son of God . . . After *many days* had gone by, the Jews met together and made plans to kill Saul, but he was told of their plan . . . one night Saul's followers took him and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. *Saul went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples . . . and so Saul stayed with them and went all over Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.*

This story is not validated by Paul in any of his surviving epistles. Paul, for example, nowhere acknowledges a debt to the obscure Ananias – mentioned in no other part of the Christian scriptures – as his original mentor in the Christian

faith. Moreover, while Acts says that Paul went to join the apostles in Jerusalem and also to preach there 'many days' after his conversion, Paul emphatically denies the truth of this report. He insists instead that the first thing he actually did after receiving his revelation was go 'at once' (Greek *eutheos*) to Arabia, and *not* to Jerusalem (see his own words above); also, that he only went to Jerusalem 'three years' (not merely 'many days') later, where he only met Peter and James, staying no more than two weeks in Peter's house. Paul further points out that he did not visit Jerusalem again until *fourteen years later* (Galatians 2:1). This was the time he met Peter and the other apostles, who finally agreed to recognize his apostleship to the Gentiles, then immediately asked him for money.

Three questions arise here. First, why did Paul, having experienced his revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, decide to go *at once* to Arabia instead of Jerusalem, although he was fully aware that the apostles who had known Jesus were in Jerusalem? Second, why did the book of Acts omit all reference to Paul's Arabian visit, although Paul himself appears to have regarded it as highly important, since he decided to go immediately after his conversion? Third, why does Paul nowhere explain exactly why he went to Arabia – at least nowhere in his available writings?

During the time of Paul, Arabia as a geographical term had two different connotations. Roman Arabia started in Damascus – a city which by Paul's own first-hand testimony (and the only one known) was governed by the agent of a King Aretas (Arabic *al-Harith*) who was Aretas IV (9 BC-AD 40), the Nabatean Arab king of Petra whom the Romans recognized as a client. Beyond the Nabatean kingdom, however, the vast peninsula of Arabia stretched all the way south to the Indian Ocean. The Greek geographer, Strabo (d. after AD 23), tells us that the western parts of this peninsula, called today the Hijaz, formed an Arabian kingdom or principality which was tributary to Petra. Further south lay the Yemen, ruled since 115 BC by the dynasty of Himyar which was to last until the sixth century AD.

Scholars have assumed that the Arabia Paul visited was Roman Arabia – the territory south of Damascus, including

modern Jordan. It has been suggested that he went there to meditate or perhaps confer with Christian recluses in the desert; to preach among the local folk; or possibly to revisit the site of his conversion outside Damascus, relive the experience which was still fresh in his mind and ponder its implications. None of the suggestions is really convincing, because none of them explain the urgency with which Paul, according to his own account, felt compelled to go *at once* to Arabia. The idea that he was revisiting the site of his conversion can be discounted, for it has already been indicated that Paul's own surviving epistles do not endorse the story of his conversion while travelling from Jerusalem to Damascus. From the way he himself speaks of his conversion, it appears to have occurred inside Damascus, not outside the city. Moreover, being in Damascus, Paul did not have to 'go' – or rather 'go away, depart' (in the original Greek, *apercho-mai)* – to Arabia, if the region indicated was in fact Roman Arabia. Damascus itself was part of that territory. Had his visit been to some other part of Roman Arabia, he would have named the particular place, rather than simply said that he *'went away* to Arabia'.

Clearly, the voyage which Paul hastened to undertake immediately following his conversion was to a place that lay beyond Roman Arabia, in the peninsula: probably the Hijaz, or the Yemen. There was an old-established and known community of Jews there at that time, and it is quite possible that Paul went to visit them. These Arabian Jews were important enough to be included among the Jewish communities of the world mentioned by Josephus in the opening passages of his book, *The Jewish Wars,* which he wrote shortly after the Roman sack of Jerusalem in AD 70. Possibly, they knew something extremely important about Jesus himself and his mission which Paul wanted to learn from them first-hand before embarking on his own apostolic work. In Jerusalem, he could only acquire this information secondhand – and perhaps in a highly edited fashion – from the followers of Jesus. Paul must have had a strong suspicion that James, Peter, John and their party were covering up some secret, and certainly not telling the full truth about the origins of their mission. Having become an apostle in his own

right by virtue of the independent revelation he had received, Paul may have felt entitled to discover for himself what this secret was.

If there was a secret about Jesus which could only be directly learnt in Arabia, and not in Palestine, then the Jerusalem apostles, and also Jesus himself, must have been in Arabia at some point. Perhaps they were Arabian Israelites who came from there. Is it for this reason that the Gospels, apart from the different infancy narratives given by Matthew and Luke, only speak of the last three years – possibly the last months or even weeks – of the career of Jesus, without saying anything about his earlier life and activity? As the self-appointed guardians of the secret of their Way *(hodos)* outside Arabia, the original disciples of Jesus must have been gravely disturbed to discover that Paul, who was not one of their number, had undertaken a journey to Arabia to find out what they knew and so, as an outside party, learn their secret. They certainly did not wish the knowledge of Paul's visit to Arabia to spread. It must have been for this reason that they deliberately suppressed all mention of this visit in accounts of Paul's early career which they fabricated and circulated. In these accounts, they claimed instead that Paul was first baptized and introduced to their Way in Damascus by Ananias who, if he was not a fictitious character, was presumably one of their own followers. After that, they claimed, Paul came to seek further instruction in Jerusalem, directly from themselves, thereby alleging that his apostleship was not independent of their own, but derived from it.

Once he had gone to Arabia and gained a direct knowledge of the secret origins of the Nazarene Way, Paul was in a position to challenge the Jerusalem apostles on their own grounds, even to the extent of standing up to James, the 'Lord's brother'. He could undermine the religious authority which these apostles were determined to keep as their special preserve. The question, however, remains: if Paul did not go to Arabia to meditate, preach or reconnoitre, but to learn something, what was it that he learnt? Was it something concerning the life of Jesus of which the Jerusalem apostles never spoke? Was it a special Israelite theology or cult which

was preached there, and from which the mission of Jesus and the apostles derived?

If Paul did learn something in Arabia about the life of Jesus, it was something that he preferred to remain silent about, for he said nothing special about the subject in his epistles. If it was a theological mystery that he became directly acquainted with, it must have been what he called 'God's secret', or 'God's secret wisdom' (as in 1 Corinthians 2:7) – the basis of his preaching of salvation through faith in the eternal Christ who was the Son of God. This 'secret wisdom' could ha.e included mystical or allegorical interpretations of the Israelite scriptures of the sort one finds in his various writings, one of which actually refers to Arabia (Galatians 4:25: 'Hagar, who stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia, is a figure of the present city of Jerusalem, in slavery with all its people').

In any case, when his visit to Arabia was over, Paul returned to Damascus, and did not go to Jerusalem until *three years later*. If he had already gained the information he needed for his apostleship during his Arabian visit, why did he finally decide to go to Jerusalem? According to Paul himself, the purpose of his visit to Jerusalem at the time was to 'know' *(historeo,* freely rendered in GNB as 'obtain knowledge from', but more correctly in AV as 'see') Peter – to have a succession of meetings with him and discover what sort of person he really was. Had he needed 'information' from Peter, he would have gone to seek it immediately after his conversion, or following his trip to Arabia, not three years after the start of his preaching career. While in Jerusalem, however, Paul also met *(eidon,* 'see, make the acquaintance of) James, the 'Lord's brother', but none of the other apostles. In reference to his meeting with James, Paul did not use the verb *historeo,* which implies thorough acquaintance, but a Greek verb which suggests a more superficial, cursory meeting; perhaps they met on only one or two occasions. While he was aware that there were other apostles in Jerusalem, Paul did not bother to make any effort to meet them.

At this point, I would like to suggest the following reconstruction of the story. After his return from Arabia, Paul

began to preach independently in Damascus; but the Jerusalem apostles had their own agents in the city, and they sent these agents instructions to oppose Paul's independent mission. Paul, apparently, had cause to believe that Peter was the most reasonable among the Jerusalem apostles, so he decided to go to Jerusalem and reach a settlement with him. As one of the original companions of Jesus, Peter could serve as an intermediary between Paul and James, who headed the Nazarene Way in Jerusalem as the brother and legitimate successor of Jesus. Peter arranged for a meeting between the two men but no settlement between them was reached, because James would not recognize the independent apostleship of Paul. So Paul left Jerusalem after two weeks, and did not visit the city again until *fourteen years later* when he attempted another settlement with James and his party. This time he was more successful, because the impoverished apostles in Jerusalem needed financial help, and Paul was in a position to provide it.

During his first Jerusalem visit, Paul probably told Peter the details of his visit to Arabia and what he had learnt there, which made him an independent party to whatever the secret of the Way may have been. His purpose would have been to silence Peter, who was an influential apostle, and so withdraw him from the ranks of the open opposition to his own preaching. Peter, no doubt, would have passed the information he received from Paul to James, but probably not to the others, who therefore continued to believe that Paul knew nothing about the Way except what was being taught in Jerusalem.

In any case, the Jerusalem opposition to Paul continued for fourteen years. When the settlement between the two sides was finally reached, it did not result in the unification of their different preachings, but only in a formal parting of ways in which each side promised to respect the independence of the other (Galatians 2:6–10):

> But those who seemed to be the leaders . . . made no new suggestions to me. On the contrary, they saw that God had given me the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as he had given Peter the task of preaching the gospel to the

> Jews . . . James, Peter and John, who seemed to be the leaders, recognized that God had given me this special task; so they shook hands with . . . me, as a sign that we were all partners. We agreed that . . . I would work among the Gentiles and they among the Jews. *All they asked was that we should remember the needy in their group, which is the very thing I have been eager to do.*

And so, the Jerusalem party finally agreed to a compact with Paul in return for a promise of financial support, which left Paul free to proceed with his mission as he pleased. The harm already done to Paul, however, could not readily be undone. Rumours to disparage his mission which had been fabricated in Jerusalem already enjoyed a wide currency among Christians in different parts of the Roman world. No matter how hard Paul tried to deny these rumours, as in his epistle to the Galatians, there were many who continued to believe them, even in the churches he himself had founded. Ultimately, these rumours found their way into the book of Acts, where they became immortalized as part of the Christian canon. Here the mention of Paul's visit to Arabia was omitted, or perhaps again deliberately suppressed.

Yet, Paul did go to Arabia, and not to Jerusalem, immediately following his conversion. This much we know from Paul himself. To discover the historical truth concerning the beginnings of Christianity – a truth which New Testament scholars generally admit to be uncertain – Paul's Arabian visit, the very mention of which was disturbing to the original followers of Jesus, may provide the needed clue. This single clue may help us solve the mystery we are attempting to investigate. We will follow its traces.

3 The Gospel Evidence

MOST scholars today agree that the Gospels cannot be regarded strictly as history; not as many may be prepared to admit how little history they actually contain. Written probably between about AD 70 and 100, the four canonical Gospels have been attributed by Christian tradition to four apostles: two of them (Matthew and John) companions of Jesus; the other two (Mark and Luke) companions of Paul. All four report stories about the life and activity of Jesus which had apparently been circulating among the Christians of the Roman world since the time of the apostles. To simplify matters, we may follow tradition and henceforth refer to these Gospels – and also to their unknown authors – as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Apart from the four canonical Gospels, there are a number of others which are excluded from the New Testament canon because they were considered from an early time to be apocryphal, or of doubtful authenticity. Those, as already observed (chapter 1), are generally reckoned to be of later authorship. While they may contain some authentic information concerning the historical Jesus, it is safer not to depend on the apocryphal Gospels as sources, and to concentrate instead on what the older, canonical Gospels have to say on the subject.

Paul, whose writings are older than the oldest known Gospels, did not believe all the stories about Jesus circulated in his time by the apostles in Jerusalem. To him, some of these stories were mere legend' with no more historical truth than the false reports circulated about Paul himself by these same apostles. Considering that the Gospels, at least in part, probably repeat what the Jerusalem apostles had originally taught about the person and mission of Jesus, it is highly unlikely that Paul would have fully endorsed the truth of

their contents. For example, while he did agree with all four Gospels that Jesus was a descendant of David, it is clear that he rejected the accuracy of the various genealogies – among them, no doubt, the two conflicting ones that ultimately found their way into the texts of Matthew and Luke. Yet Paul, in his own writings, said very little about Jesus as a human being. For information about the man in the Christian scriptures, we have mainly the Gospels to go by.

Because they frequently speak of general political events in connection with the life and career of Jesus (what are technically called 'synchronisms'), the canonical Gospels give the impression that their authors had done their historical homework and knew exactly what they were talking about. Upon closer scrutiny, however, this turns out to be largely incorrect. Scholars today commonly concede that the Gospels were written to prove that the historical Jesus was in fact the expected Israelite Messiah, or Christ, rather than provide an accurate biography. It is for this reason that they are replete with references to prophecies from the Israelite scriptures - what Christians call the Old Testament.

What many scholars underestimate, however, is the extent to which the Gospels actually construct their accounts of the life and career of the historical Jesus on the basis of Old Testament prophecy, and at least in some instances, on nothing else. Reconsidered in this light, much of the apparently historical content of the Gospels turns out to be little more than esoteric exegesis of passages of Old Testament text which relate, or are taken to relate, to the expected Messiah. In many instances, the authors of the different Gospels actually quote the Old Testament texts in question; in others, where no quotations are made, the Old Testament model for the Gospel material is easy to discover.

Such spinning out of elaborate stories from cryptic passages of sacred scripture is certainly not peculiar to the Gospels. It is attested in all cultures. In the Islamic literature, for instance, there is a treatise on pre-Islamic Arabian idols written in the ninth century AD by a certain Ibn al-Kalbi – a work which has long been considered original and authoritative. Parts of it certainly are, and can be demonstrated to be so. For example, where Ibn al-Kalbi speaks of Wadd, the

ancient South Arabian god of love, long recognized by scholars as the original prototype of the Greek Eros and the Roman Cupid, he said that the idol of this god represented him as a man on horseback aiming an arrow with his bow. In the Greek and Roman representations of the same god, the man becomes a child and the horse disappears, but the bow and arrow remain.* On the other hand, in speaking of a number of other gods and their sculptural representations, Ibn al-Kalbi simply elaborates on passing references to different Arabian idols which appear in the Koran, the elaborations being either the work of his own fancy, or derivations from his sources. Living two centuries after Islam, he probably knew little more about these particular pre-Islamic Arabian idols than a modern scholar can deduce directly from the text of the Koran today.

To appreciate the real extent to which the Gospel material is in fact exegetical elaboration of Old Testament material, let us consider the example of the Christmas story as told in Matthew. This Gospel explains that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she discovered that she was with child by the Holy Spirit. Matthew immediately adds: 'Now all this happened in order to make what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah come true, "a virgin will become pregnant and have a son . . ." ' (1:22–3, referring to Isaiah 7:14). Matthew next explains that Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, 'For this is what the prophet wrote: "Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least of the cities of Judah; for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel" ' (2:5–6, referring to Micah 5:2).† Matthew also relates how the Magi arrived from the east with presents for the baby Jesus (2:1–12), but omits to say that this story is again inspired by an Old Testament prophecy, this one from

* While the name Cupid derives from the Latin *cupere,* 'long for, desire', the name Eros, barring the Greek suffix, is identical with the standard Arabic designation for the phallus.

† According to John (7:41–2), many people in Jerusalem did not accept Jesus as the Messiah because he came from Galilee, whereas the Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem. So, according to one tradition, Jesus was not born in Bethlehem.

Isaiah (60:3): 'Nations will be drawn to your light, and kings to the dawning of your day.' In the Christmas story under consideration, the alien Magi, representing the Gentile 'nations', were drawn to the place where Jesus was born by the 'light' of his star (2:2): a star which miraculously 'stopped right over the place where the child was' (2:10).*

When King Herod of Judea heard that the Magi were asking where the baby was born who was destined to be the 'king of the Jews', he ordered the killing of all the boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhood who were two years old or younger (Matthew 2:16). King Herod of Judea (37 BC–AD 4), as is well known, was an important historical figure in early Roman Palestine, but the available records do not indicate that he ever ordered a massacre of all the male infants of the Bethlehem district. However, after relating this episode in his Christmas story, Matthew stops to point out that: 'In this way what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true: "A sound is heard in Ramah, the sound of bitter weeping. Rachel is crying for her children; she refuses to be comforted, for they are dead" ' (2:17–18, quoting Jeremiah 31:15). Rachel, it must be explained here, is spoken of in the Old Testament as a wife of Jacob, the common ancestor claimed for the Israelite tribes, and she reportedly died in the vicinity of Bethlehem and was buried there (Genesis 35:19).

Matthew next says that Joseph, to keep Jesus safe from the massacre ordered by Herod, took the baby and his mother to Egypt, then brought them back after Herod was dead – all this 'to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, "I called my son out of Egypt" ' (2:15, quoting Hosea 11:1). Afraid to go back to Judea, where 'Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as king' (2:22, the reference to Herod's succession being historically correct), Joseph took his wile and son to Galilee instead, where they settled in the town of Nazareth. Here Matthew points out: 'And so what the prophets had said came true: "He will be called a Nazarene" '

* It has been maintained, perhaps correctly, that the details Matthew gives about the star of Bethlehem are astronomically explicable. This would mean that the source from which Matthew took his story of the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus referred to a particular celestial phenomenon. But the matter makes no difference to the present argument.

(2:23, the prophetic reference indicated here being uncertain).*

Remove the exegetical material from Matthew's Christmas story, and nothing of it remains. The same is partly true of the different Christmas story told in Luke, and of much else of the ostensibly biographical content of the Gospels in general. This, of course, does not mean that all the elements in all the Gospel stories are fabrication, based on Old Testament prophecy. What it does mean is that one cannot tell which elements in any given story are historically correct but happen to have Old Testament parallels, and which elements are not correct. Here are some other examples to consider:

1 On the surface, the story related in Luke (2:41–52) about the visit of the boy Jesus to the Jerusalem temple, where he baffled the learned rabbis by his intellectual precocity, seems plausible enough as biographical information. But in fact it pleads for a parallel between the figures of Jesus and Mary on the one hand, and those of the Old Testament prophet Samuel and his mother Hannah on the other. The secret here is given away by Luke in the last verse of the story: 'Jesus grew both in body and wisdom, gaining favour with God and men.' According to the Old Testament, 'The boy Samuel grew up in the service of the Lord . . . [He] continued to grow and to gain favour both with the Lord and with men (1 Samuel 2:21, 26).

2 The story of the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–2) is apparently told to give a special interpretation of two passages of Old Testament text: 'You are my son; today I have become your father' (Psalms 2:7); 'Here is my servant, whom I strengthen - the one I have chose i ,'ith whom I am pleased' (Isaiah 42:1). According to the Gospel story, Jesus had no sooner been baptized by John the Baptist than a voice from heaven announced: 'This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased.'

* Most probably, Matthew makes a confusion here between a Nazarene (a person from Nazareth) and a Nazirite (a boy vowed to the lifelong service of God). If the indication in the original traditions from which Matthew took his story was to a 'Nazirite', not a 'Nazarene", then the prophetic reference, in misquotation, would be to one of the Nazirites mentioned in the Old Testament – perhaps the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1:28). For a clearer cryptic Gospel reference to Samuel in speaking of Jesus, see below.

3 The story of the temptation of Jesus when he was fasting in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13) expands on four passages of Old Testament text (Deuteronomy 6:13, 16; 8:3; Psalms 91:11–12) which Jesus is actually made to quote in dialogue with his temptor, identified as the Devil. These passages are thereby given a special esoterical explanation in terms of the life and career of the historical Jesus. What may be further noticed here is that the duration the Gospels give to the fast of Jesus in the wilderness recalls, among other things, the duration of the flood in the Biblical story of Noah (Genesis 7:17); it is also identical with the reported duration of the fast of Moses on Mount Sinai before the Lord, Yahweh, renewed with him his covenant with Israel (Exodus 34:28). The number forty in all three cases may simply be a topos to indicate a full ritual term.

4 Jesus, we are told, began preaching in Galilee (Matthew 4:12–17; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:14–15), which made his career confirm a prophecy from Isaiah (9:1–2). Matthew gives the secret away by quoting this prophecy, which Mark and Luke do not. The original of this prophecy (somewhat garbled in the Greek of Matthew) reads: 'The land of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali was once disgraced, but the future will bring honour to this region . . . and even to Galilee itself where the foreigners live. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in the land of the shadows, but now light is shining upon them.'

5 The healing work of Jesus, as related in the Gospels, is explained by Matthew (8:16–17) in terms of another prophecy from Isaiah (53:4): 'Jesus drove out the evil spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. He did this to make what the prophet Isaiah had said come true, "He himself took our sickness and carried away our diseases.'"

There is no need to labour the point. Scholars have known all this for a long time. The whole story of the passion and death of Jesus, as told in the Gospels, is replete with direct or cryptic references to Old Testament prophecies. Also, the reported teachings of Jesus are to a great extent reinterpretations of Old Testament material. It is certainly possible that

some were actual teachings of Jesus. In the Gospels, however, the story of this Jesus, whatever its original truth, is extracted from the historical reality and confused with material drawn from the Old Testament, to prove that the man was none other than the promised Israelite Messiah.

Later in our investigation, an attempt must be made to discover what sources other than the Old Testament were used in putting together the transcendental image of Jesus which emerges from the Gospels. For the moment, however, let us try to find the authentic material in the Gospels that gives *an* account of Jesus as a historical person. To discover this material, we have to begin by discounting the historicity of everything in the Gospels which refers back directly or indirectly to the Old Testament, even in cases when what is said may be historically plausible. Once this is done, what is left are a few items of fortuitous information (*obiter dicta,* or 'passing remarks'), which there is no reason to consider untrue.

1 Jesus is referred to in Mark (6:3) as 'the carpenter' (Greek *tekton),* and in Matthew (13:55) as 'the carpenter's son'. This could mean that Jesus actually came from a family which traditionally practised carpentry. On the other hand, it may simply indicate that the surname of Jesus was the Aramaic *Bar Nagara,* meaning 'Son of the Carpenter'. In Semitic surnames (as in modern Arabic ones) the part of the appellation indicating descent or flliality (in Aramaic *Bar,* meaning 'son of) can be maintained or dropped. Hence, the surname of Jesus could have been indicated either as Bar Nagara (i.e. 'Son of the Carpenter'), or more simply as Nagara (i.e. 'the Carpenter').

2 The father of Jesus was called Joseph. On this point all four Gospels agree (Matthew l:16ff.; 2:13ff.; Luke 1:27; 2:4ff.; 3:23; John 1:45; 6:42). It is not certain that the mother of the historical Jesus was called Mary. While Matthew, Mark and Luke identify her by this name, but say nothing about her immediate family, John seems to make a point of leaving her unnamed (2:1, 3, 5, 12; 6:42; 19:25, 26), but speaks of her in one instance as attending her son's crucifixion accompanied by a sister (Greek *adelphe*) called Mary, identified as Mary

the wife of Clopas (19:25). The mother of Jesus could not have been called Mary if she really did have a sister by the same name. Faced with this problem, Christian tradition has assumed that the two women were half sisters by the same mother but by different fathers, although there is nothing in the Gospels to support this assumption.

3 Jesus had four brothers called James, Simon, Joses and Judas, and more than one sister (Matthew 13:55;* Mark 6:3).

4 He began to attract public attention shortly after the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius (i.e. AD 28 or 29, Luke 3:1), when he was about 30 years old (Luke 3:23); when Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee (4 BC–AD 39, Matthew 14:lff.; Mark 6:14ff; Luke 3:lff.); and when Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea (AD 26–36, Luke 3:1). Of this information, the reported age of Jesus is the only one that raises a question, because it seems to plead for two Old Testament parallels: first, the reported age of the Old Testament Joseph when he entered the service of Pharaoh (Genesis 41:46); second, the age of David when he first began to reign as king (2 Samuel 5:4).

5 Jesus had disciples and friends (men and women) whose names are cited in the Gospels, though not always with consistency (see below).

6 He led a disturbance in the Jerusalem temple, after which he was tried in the presence of Pontius Pilate and put to death on the eve of the Jewish passover (Matthew 27:2ff; Mark 15:lff.; Luke 23:lff.), or the day before (John 18:29ff.). Here, one may doubt that the crucifixion of Jesus necessarily took place one or two days before the Jewish Passover, because this can imply an esoteric comparison between his execution and the killing of the Jewish Paschal lamb.

Some of this Gospel information about Jesus is validated by other sources. It has already been noted that both the apostle Paul and the Jewish historian Jospehus attest to the fact that Jesus had a brother called James, who was their contemporary. Paul actually met this James. In his *Ecclesiastical History,* Eusebius of Caesaria (d. AD c.340) speaks of grand-

* Matthew, repeating the information from Mark, renders the name Joses as Joseph.

children of another brother of Jesus, Jude (i.e. Judas), who were living in Galilee during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (AD 81–96). Quoting the authority of the second-century Christian historian Hegesippus, whose original work has been lost, Eusebius (3:19–20) relates the following story about them:

> The same emperor ordered the execution of all who were of David's line . . . And there still survived of the Lord's family the grandsons of Jude, who was said to be His brother, humanly speaking. These were informed against as being of David's line, and brought. . . before Domitian Caesar . . . Domitian asked them whether they were descended from David, and they admitted it. Then he asked them what property they owned and what funds were at their disposal. They replied that they had only 9,000 denarii between them, half belonging to each; this, they said, was not available in cash, but was the estimated value of only twenty-five acres of land, from which they raised the money to pay their taxes and the wherewithal to support themselves by their own toil. Then . . . they showed him their hands, putting forward as proof of their toil the hardness of their bodies and the calluses impressed on their hands by incessant labour. . . When asked about Christ and His Kingdom . . . they explained that it was not of this world ... On hearing this, Domitian found no fault in them, but despising them as beneath his notice let them go free.

This story, as related on near-contemporary authority, confirms that Jesus did have at least one brother other than James who was in fact called Judas. It further suggests that the career of Jesus could have had a political as well as a religious dimension.

According to the Jewish Talmud, Jesus ('Jeshu', strictly *Yeshu")* was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier called Panther who dabbled in magic, mocked men of learning, gathered five disciples around him, caused a popular stir, and was hanged on the eve of the Jewish Passover. This corroborates what the Gospels say about the disturbance created by the historical Jesus in the Jerusalem temple, after

which he was put to death one or two days before the Passover. Writing in AD c.lll, the Roman historian Tacitus (15:444) reports that the Christian trouble-makers of his time were so called after *Chrestus* who was put to death during the reign of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea. Tacitus may well have had no source of information concerning the period in which Jesus was put to death other than contemporary Christian hearsay. However, he apparently saw no reason to doubt that Jesus was executed in the days of Tiberius and Pilate, as the Gospels contend.

The Talmudic evidence confirms the fact that the name of Jesus (Greek *Iesous),* in Aramaic, was Jeshu (Hebrew Biblical *Yeshua',* or Jeshua). What has intrigued scholars, however, is the name Panther (in the original *Pantera,* or *Pandera),* where the Talmud refers to Jesus as 'Jeshu Ben Pantera', or 'Ben Pandera', meaning 'son of Pantera', or 'Pandera'. Some have speculated that 'Pantera', here, is possibly a corruption of the Greek *parthenos,* meaning 'virgin'. The discovery in Germany of the tombstone of a Roman soldier called 'Tiberius Julius Abdes Panthera' has encouraged further speculations on the possibility that the father of the historical Jesus was actually called 'Panther'. To this day, however, 'son of a lioness' *(Ibn al-labwah)* is an Arabic expression of insult commonly heard in Egypt. In the Talmud, 'Ben Pantera', meaning no more than 'son of a she-leopard' (the term *pantera* for 'she-leopard' being apparently a borrowing from Latin), can hardly be anything more than such a derogatory expression. The suspicion of illegitimacy for any person for whom virgin birth is claimed is only natural. What remains important, however, is that the Talmud clearly testifies to the historical existence of Jesus, presenting his name in its original Aramaic form unequivocally as Jeshu.

As already noted, the Gospel accounts concerning the personal following of Jesus, which give many of their names (more often than not fortuitously), can also be considered for the most part historically authentic. There are, of course, some contradictions to be sorted out, involving different names given to the same person. Luke, for example, refers to

a disciple of Jesus who was a tax collector called Levi (5:27–9). Mark identifies the same man as Levi the son ol

Alphaeus (2:13–14). In Matthew, on the other hand, the tax collector who followed Jesus is called Matthew (9:9; 10:3) – a name which is given by Mark (3:18) and Luke (6:15) to another disciple. Then, there is the question of the disciple called Simon Cephas, or Peter. Matthew (16:17) and John (1:42) identify this Simon as Bar-Jona, or 'the son of Jona', when they relate how Simon came to be surnamed Cephas, or Peter. In Aramaic, *bar yawna* can be an idiomatic term of endearment, meaning 'young dove' – literally, 'son of the dove'. In one other instance, however, John (21:15) calls the disciple 'Simon Jona', as if Jona was his surname. Neither Mark nor Luke call the same disciple by such a surname. Should we understand here that Jesus sometimes addressed Simon Cephas affectionately as 'young dove', which Matthew and John understood to be his surname? Could it be that his father was actually called Jona? Or is there a remote possibility here again that the Gospels confuse two different individuals having the same first name, but different surnames? There are some hints in the Gospels of the position taken by Jesus with respect to the politics of Palestine in his time. Here again, the Gospel information is fortuitous, and therefore deserving of special attention. The historical Jesus apparently thought it proper for his people to obey the Roman state ('Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor . . .', see Mark 12:14ff.; Matthew 22:17ff.; Luke 20:22ff.). Certainly, there is no indication that he preached rebellion against it. It is possible that he even acquiesced to violent punitive action by the Romans against Jewish trouble-makers. When told on one occasion how Pilate had killed some Galileans while they were offering sacrifices to God (no doubt to the accompaniment of political agitation), he did not condemn the Roman action (see Luke 13:2–3); instead, he reportedly responded:

> Because those Galileans were killed in that way, do you think it proves that they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will die as they did . . .

While it is difficult to establish exactly what Jesus could have meant by this oblique statement, it does seem to

indicate that he was not much concerned with the manner in which Romans punished Jewish pgitators.

On the other hand, the Gospels speak of Jesus as being especially hostile to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee (Mark 8:15). In fact, they depict Jesus as the target of a conspiracy by the partisans of the tetrarch, called the Herodians, who were reportedly in league with the Jewish Pharisees against him (Matthew 22:16; Mark 3:6; 12:13). This may explain why Jesus, having started his preaching activity in Galilee, finally decided to abandon that territory and move to Judea, perhaps in search of Roman protection.

It is in fact highly likely that the career of the historical Jesus was somehow connected to the political intrigues of the period between the Roman procuratorship of Judea and the house of Herod. Considering that Jesus was commonly accepted as a descendant of David, there must have been some Israelites who regarded him as having a legitimate claim to David's throne. Perhaps the Romans initially overlooked - even encouraged - his dynastic ambitions in order to cause political embarrassment to Herod Antipas in Galilee, and to other members of the house of Herod. Those, after all, were a dynasty of 'Idumeans' from southern Palestine, of local Arameo-Arab origin, and only lately converted to Judaism. As such, they could make no credible claim to Israelite descent, let alone descent from the royal house of David. When Jesus was forced to leave Galilee and arrived in Judea to enter Jerusalem, his enthusiastic popular reception, as reported by the Gospels, could not have been easily arranged had the local Roman authorities not condoned it. Certainly, the Gospels do not report any Roman concern over the incident; nor do they report any attempt by the Romans to intervene in the agitation which Jesus apparently perpetrated in the Jerusalem temple. According to all four Gospels, the people who clamoured in Jerusalem for the trial and execution of Jesus were local Jews, not Romans. These Jews reportedly tried to present Jesus to Pilate as an enemy of the Roman state, but Pilate remained unconvinced of his guilt on this count (Luke 23:2–4; John 19:12–16). It was under strong Jewish pressure that Pilate finally yielded and agreed to have Jesus taken and crucified.

Today, many scholars take the view that the Gospel writers acquitted Pilate of responsibility for the death of Jesus in order to make Christianity more palatable to the Roman Gentiles. But in fact the Gospels largely represent the point of view of the Hebraic party among the apostles. The man who first began to encourage the propagation of Christianity among the Gentiles, including the Romans, was Paul, who had nothing to do with the writing of the Gospels. Furthermore, the Jewish historian Josephus, writing three or four decades after the death of Jesus, endorsed what is written in the Gospels and by Paul about the Jewish responsibility for his execution. He wrote in the *Antiquities* (18:3:3): 'Pilate, *at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us* . . . condemned him to the cross.'

So much, or perhaps slightly more, can be deduced about the historical Jesus from the Gospels, with the help of the little other material available; and Paul recognized this same historical Jesus as being his Christ. As already noted, Paul had probably never met this Jesus in life. What remains highly significant, however, is that when Paul decided to become a follower and apostle of Jesus, he did not go to find information about him in Jerusalem, among his original disciples who still lived in the city, as one would have expected. Oddly enough, and by his own sworn testimony ('What I write is true! God knows I am not lying!', Galatians 1:20), he went directly to Arabia instead. The first-hand information he needed about Jesus either as a man, or as the promised Jewish Messiah was to be found in Arabia rather than in Jerusalem. This means that the historical Jesus had some connection with Arabia. He was either a man who came from there, or the representative of an Israelite religious or political movement whose original centre was Arabian. Perhaps he was both.

Paul's visit to Arabia is a historical fact. Yet the book of Acts, representing the predelictions of the Jerusalem apostles whom Paul never consulted about Jesus, made a point of ignoring it. This suggests that there was a great secret involved.

4 The Koranic Testimony

A Christian may balk at the idea of resorting to the Koran for evidence concerning the origins of Christianity. But the holy book of Islam speaks profusely of Jesus, and it would be unreasonable to reject its evidence before examining it.

To Muslims, the Koran is the eternal word of God as revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad between c.610 and his death in AD 632. It is composed of 114 chapters (Arabic singular *surah)* of varying lengths, some consisting of no more than a few verses. In the longer chapters, however, large sections are devoted to the question of the Israelites and their prophets, and a clear distinction is made between the Israelites *(Banu Isra'il)* and the Jews *(al-Yahud).** The Israelites are depicted as the historical 'chosen' people who were the 'preferred' of God in their time, despite their frequent lapses into error; the Jews, on the other hand, are spoken of as an existing religious community (by implication, of Israelite origin) which pays special deference to Ezra (see below).

Like the Jews, the Christians in the Koran (invariably called *Nasara,* strictly 'Nazarenes' rather than *Masihiyyun,* or 'Christians') are considered to be another religious community of Israelite origin – a sister community to that of the Jews, and not an offshoot from it. As the founder of the 'Nazarene' community, the Jesus of the Koran is not called Jeshu (standard Christian Arabic *Yasu'),* but Issa (closest

* Strictly, the Israelites are an ancient people whose history, until the fifth or fourth century Be, is recorded in the Hebrew Bible. The Jews, on the other hand, are the followers of Biblical monotheism and the laws of Moses as interprepted and developed by rabbinical tradition in post-exilic times (i.e. after the sixth century Be).

English pronunciation of the Arabic *'Isa),* which is an entirely different name. If rendered into Greek, however, Issa, like Jeshu, can be *Iesous* (see below). According to the Koran, the Jewish Torah and the one, authentic Gospel *(al-Injil,* always in the singular) of Issa were both, originally, no different from the Koran, but their texts had been deliberately corrupted.

While the Koran is generally critical of the Jews, in some cases to the point of outright condemnation, it appears to make a subtle distinction between two types of Christians, both called *Nasara,* or 'Nazarenes'. On the one hand, there were those considered to be religiously in grave error, because they maintained that God is not one but part of a divine trinity. On the other, there were the true-believing *Nasara* who apparently made common cause with the community of Islam as it first emerged (5:82–5):

> You will find the closest in affection to those who have accepted the faith, those who say, 'We are *Nasara';* this is because there are priests and hermits among them, and they are not arrogant. When they listen to what has been revealed to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears as they recognize the truth; they say, 'Lord, we believe; enroll us as witnesses . . .' God rewards them for what they say: gardens beneath which rivers flow, where they will live forever. This is the reward of those who do good.

Christian scholars have tended to view what the Koran says about the person and mission of Issa as a garbled version of canonical or apocryphal Gospel accounts. In fact, most of the material it presents is highly original. It is therefore reasonable, at least tentatively, to proceed on the assumption that the Koranic story of Issa preserves an independent tradition concerning the origins of Christianity – a tradition which was still current in Arabia in the seventh century, when Islam was born. According to the Islamic historians, the materials of the Koran, as originally recited by Muhammad, were finally compiled and redacted during the reign of the caliph Uthman (AD 64456), approximately two decades after the Prophet's death. Since then, the Koranic text has been preserved in only one version. The least this would mean is

that the Arabian traditions regarding Issa found in the Koran have reached us unchanged from the seventh century. What do these traditions say?

To begin with, assuming that the Koranic Issa was the same person as the Jesus of the Gospels, it would be useful to reverse the question and ask: what does the Koran *not* say about the man? In the preceding chapter, six items of fortuitous information concerning Jesus were extracted from the Gospels; we assumed that these may be historically correct because they do not appear to involve any special pleading (the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy). In addition, there is the clear fact that Gospel Jesus in his time was commonly accepted as a descendant of David, which gives a total of seven items. Surprisingly, none of these seven items feature in the Koran:

1 The Koran does not refer to Issa as carpenter, or as son of a carpenter, regardless of whether this was his inherited vocation or his surname.
2 The Koran nowhere speaks of Issa as having a human father, let alone calling his father Joseph. On the other hand, the Koran is everywhere emphatic on the point that the mother of Issa was called Mary (Arabic *Maryam),* invariably identifying the man as *'Isa Ibn Maryam* – Issa son of Mary.
3 The Koran nowhere speaks of Issa as having brothers and sisters.
4 The Koran does not specify the period of the mission of Issa, nor does it in any way associate his career with Palestine.
5 The Koran does not name any individual disciples or associates of Issa.
6 While the Koran makes a number of references to David, and actually elaborates on his career, it nowhere speaks of Issa as being a descendant of David. This is a particularly noteworthy anomaly given the importance of genealogy and genealogical tradition in early Arabian society.
7 The Koran does not say that Issa ever led a religious or political riot anywhere, and unequivocally denies the claim that he was crucified or put to death in any manner.

What it actually asserts on this point is that someone assumed to be the man was the person who met this fate: 'They did not kill him; they did not crucify him; but they were taken by similarity' (Arabic *wa-lakin shubbiha lahum* Koran 4:157).

Thus, on all seven of the above counts, the Jesus of the Koran, who was Issa, has nothing in common with the Jesus of the Gospels, who was Jeshu, except that their different historical identities came somehow to be confused: 'They were taken by similarity'. One 'similarity', no doubt, is the fact that 'Jeshu' and 'Issa', which are entirely different names in their original Aramaic, can both be *Iesous,* for 'Jesus', in Greek transliteration. It has been commonly assumed that Muhammad, ignoring the standard Arabic form of the name of Jeshu as *Yasu',* opted instead for the Greek form of the name, which he freely transliterated back into what he thought was its Semitic original, thus transforming the *Iesous* of the Greek Gospels into the Koranic *'Isa.* This, however, could not have been the case, because Muhammad belonged to an Arabian environment where Christianity was an established religion of long standing, and where many local Christians - Nazarenes and others - could have advised him on what the founder of Christianity was actually called.

It is therefore far more reasonable to assume that the Koran spoke of Jesus as Issa, not as Jeshu, because there was actually a 'Jesus' revered in Arabia, certainly until the seventh century AD, who was called Issa rather than Jeshu. Of this Issa, the Koran has the following to say.

1 He was the son of the virgin Mary, and by implication her only child (*passim*).
2 He was the *kalimah* of God (consonantally spelt *klmh,* and conventionally taken to be the Arabic equivalent of the Greek *logos,* meaning the 'word') (3:45; 4:171).
3 He was born somewhere to the 'east' of a given place (19:16), the point of reference being presumably Mecca, the birthplace of Islam in the Arabian land of the Hijaz; and he emerged from his virgin mother's womb at the foot of a palm tree (19:23).
4 He was a man of God to whom a special 'book' was

divinely delivered (19:27–33), which was the Gospel (in the singular, Arabic *Injil,* transliterating the Greek *euaggelion,* e.g. 5:17). This Gospel of Jesus was none other than the one and only 'book' (19:30), the implication being that its contents were identical with those of the Koran.

5 He was 'spirit' (Arabic *ruh)* from God, and was endowed with the Holy Spirit (Arabic *ruh al-quds,* literally, 'the spirit of holiness') (2:87; 5:110).

6 He was (or was called) the Christ (Arabic *al-Masih),* an appellation which the Koran cites but neither explains nor disputes (3:45; 4:157, 171, 172; 5:17, 71, 72, 75; 9:30, 31).

7 He was born pure (Arabic *zaki)* (19:19).

8 He was not the product of human procreation but, like Adam, an original creation of God (3:59).

9 He worked miracles, and could bring the dead back to life (2:87; 3:49ff.; 5:112ff.; 43:57), but unbelievers denounced his miracles as tricks of magic (5:110; 61:6).

10 He was himself a miraculous being (Arabic *ayah,* meaning 'miracle', 'sign', 'token' of God) (23:50).

11 He was endowed with the gift of divination (3:49).

12 He was an apostle to the 'people of Israel' (3:49). The Koran nowhere indicates that he was 'Jewish', or a prophet to the 'Jews'.

13 Issa was a consecrated or ordained person (Arabic *muqarrab,* which can actually mean 'priest'; cf. *mukarrib* in ancient South Arabian, meaning 'priest'); and his prominence belongs to this world and the next (3:45).

14 He confirmed the contents of the Torah of Moses, but permitted some things which the Torah had forbidden (3:50).

15 Some Israelites (not Jews) followed him, while others did not (61:14).

16 The disciples who followed him and were his 'champions' (Arabic *ansar)* were called *al-hawariyyun* (meaning 'the people in white', from the Aramaic *hawar,* 'assume white clothing as a party badge') (3:52; 5:111, 112; 61:14).*

* The wearing of white garments as a sign of purity is attested for Jewish

17 He announced that an apostle called *Ahmad* would follow him (61:6), traditionally understood to be a reference to the mission of Muhammad (the names *Ahmad* and *Muhammad* are different derivatives from the same Arabic root *hmd).*

18 Some people, in error, considered him to be the son of God, just as some Jews, in equal horror, considered Ezra to be the son of God (9:30). The Koran renders the orginally Aramaic name of Ezra in the Arabic diminutive (and possibly derogatory) form as *'Uzayr.*

19 Some people, again in error, considered Issa to be God in person (5:17; cf. 5:116).

20 Issa was in fact human (5:75) and mortal (4:159; 5:17; 19:33; and perhaps 3:55).

21 The followers of Issa were the community of the *Nasara* (i.e. the 'Nazarenes', *passim).*

22 The Jews claimed that they had killed Issa, but his death by crucifixion, *asserted by some but not by others,* was no more than an illusion (4:157). The reference here is to the Jews as a religious community, not to the Israelites as a people. It is also hinted in this passage that there were sects among the 'Nazarenes' (here, by implication, a reference to Christians in general) who did not believe that Jesus died on the cross.

23 God made Issa ascend to him (3:55; 4:158).

24 He was to be brought to life again (19:33), to bear witness against unbelievers on the day of the Resurrection (4:159).

25 The Koranic account of Issa is the correct one, as opposed to other accounts of him which are hypocritical and false (19:34). The reference here is obviously to scriptures which include the surviving Gospels of the Christian canon.

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sects such as the Essenes of early Roman Palestine, as spoken of by Josephus. Judging by Islamic traditions concerning the Nazarenes (see chapter 5), it appears that their priests, at least, distinguished themselves by wearing white. The Manichaeans, an independent, puritan religious community of eclectic character which emerged in Iraq and Persia in the third century AD, were called in Syriac *halle heware,* meaning 'the white robes'.

This Koranic information concerning the 'Jesus' who was Issa can be distilled into a coherent narrative. Originally, this narrative relates, the people of Israel were organized into a religious community by Moses, who gave them the Torah. Later, two other apostles were sent to them, first Ezra, then Issa. The followers of the first became the Jews; the followers of the second the Nazarene Christians; and each of these two communities came to revere its special apostle as a son of God. Among some 'Nazarenes' (here the Christians in general) Jesus even came to be worshipped as God himself.

Born of a virgin, Issa was a miraculous being whose human person was a living manifestation of the Holy Spirit and the divine *kalimah,* or prophetic 'word'. He performed miracles, and was able to raise the dead back to life. As a man, he was a consecrated or ordained person, which implies an association with priesthood. While he accepted the essence of the Mosaic law, he made a point of alleviating some of its rigour in his own preaching, which was the Gospel. In life, he was surrounded by a select group of followers called *al-Hawariyyun,* apparently because they wore special white robes. The Jews, however, opposed his mission and scoffed at his miracles, and there was a claim among them that they actually succeeded in putting him to death, either by crucifixion or in some other manner. There were even Christians who accepted this claim. The person who was really crucified, however, was not Issa himself but someone else with whom his identity was confused. The real Issa was assumed to heaven, regardless of whether or not he died a natural human death. Before leaving the earth, he prophesied the coming of another apostle called *Ahmad.* Ultimately, Issa was to return to life, to pass the final judgement on mankind on the day of the Resurrection.

There are two points in this reconstructed Koranic story which are particularly remarkable. First, it makes the correct distinction between the Mosaic monotheism of the early Israelites, and the Jewish faith which began to evolve from it in post-exilic times – with the career of Ezra, by general reckoning. Second, the story clearly depicts Judaism and the original Christianity of the Nazarenes as different departures from the original religion of Israel, and thus suggests a new

vision of the origins of Christianity as a sister religion to Judaism, rather than as a runaway Jewish sect, as has long been the common view. While the Koran does not fix a place or date for the mission of Issa, it does give the general impression that, as a latter-day prophet to Israel, he was active in the same environment where Islam was born, i.e. in Western Arabia; also, that Nazarene Christianity emerged at a time when the Israelites, as a people, as distinct from the Jews as a latter-day religious community, still existed – which implies a date for the mission of the Koranic 'Jesus' which is perhaps closer to the fifth century BC than to the first century AD. While there is nothing in Islamic literature to endorse such an early date for the career of Issa, there is at least one indication in this literature that Christianity (certainly, the religion of the *Nasara*) originated in Arabia rather than Palestine. Writing his geographical dictionary *al-Rawd al-mi'tar fi khabar al-aqtar* in the fourteenth century AD, Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Himyari, a North African Arab originally from the Yemen, expanded on the history of pre-Islamic Christianity in the region of Najran, on the north-eastern peripheries of the Yemen, remarking unequivocally that 'the origin of this religion was in Najran' (*wa-kan asl dhalik al-din bi-Najran*).*

That Christianity should have originated in Arabia before making a fresh start and assuming a new form in Palestine is not implausible. As indicated in the introduction, I remain personally convinced that the history of the Biblical Israelites ran its full course in Western Arabia, and that the original monotheism of Moses as well as the Judaism that evolved from it have their roots there, and not in Palestine. In terms of historical geography, Palestine can be viewed as a northward extension of Western Arabia, and some Arabian Israelites apparently did arrive to settle in that country in Biblical times. Later, during the Hellenistic period, Judaism under the Hasmonean dynasty came to have one of its main political centres in Palestine, where the principal Jewish city was called Jerusalem after the older, Israelite (and hence

* See *al-Rawd al-Mi'tar fi khabar al-aqtar,* ed. Ihsan Abbas (Beirut, 1984), p. 573.

Biblical) Jerusalem of Arabia - probably the present village of Al Sharim in the Asir highlands, once referred to in ancient Arabi literature as *Uri Shalim*.

Subsequently, Herod the Great erected a great temple in the Palestinian Jerusalem, which was destroyed when the city was sacked by the Romans in AD 70. The so-called Wailing Wall in this city is the remnant of this temple, and of no other. Despite continuous archaeological efforts, not the least shred of evidence has been discovered to indicate that the Biblical temple of King Solomon had earlier stood on the same site. In fact, there is clear evidence that it did not. The most outstanding natural feature of the premises of Herod's temple is the monolith which stands to this day under the famous Dome of the Rock, which was erected to provide it with architectural cover in Islamic times. The Biblical description of the temple of Solomon, which is fully detailed (1 Kings 6:2–36), does not mention any conspicuous monolith standing within its precincts.

In Western Arabia, the political history of the Israelites, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, came to an end with the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and the captivity of its people by the Babylonians in 586 BC. After conquering Babylon in 539 BC, the Persians arranged for large numbers of the Israelite exiles to return to their Arabian homelands and attempt a reconstruction of their society on its original territory. The career of Ezra belongs to this period. While the returned exiles were not successful in re-establishing themselves in Western Arabia as a state, they probably continued to exist in the area for a long time as a people organized in different urban or rural communities, or as tribes. Of their affairs, however, we know nothing because of the absence of records - unless the Koran preserves the rudiments of such a record, which appears to be the case. The Koran certainly does not specify that Ezra and Issa were apostles to the post-exilic Israelites in Arabia, but the reason for this may simply be that this matter was taken for granted.

One point on which the Koran lays special emphasis is that Issa had no human father but was simply the 'Son of Mary'. As already observed, the Gospel of John leaves the mother of Jesus (here Jeshu, not Issa) intentionally unnamed; and while

the other three Gospels do call her Mary, they say little more about her than John does. In the Koran, however, Mary features almost as prominently as Issa, and the biographical information about her is considerable.

1 Mary was the 'daughter' of 'Imran (the Biblical Amram, father of Moses and Aaron) (66:12), and the 'sister' of Aaron (19:28). In the Koran (3:33), the 'house of Amram' *(A I Imran)* are spoken of as being among the elect of God. According to the Hebrew Bible, they belonged to the priestly Israelite tribe of Levi. On the surface, it appears that the Koran confuses Mary the mother of Issa with the Biblical prophetess Miriam who was reportedly the daughter of Amram and the sister of Moses and Aaron, the name Mary (Greek *Maria)* being actually a Hellenized form of the Semitic Miriam. This is what scholars have generally maintained. It is more likely, however, that the Koranic reference to Mary as the 'daughter' of Amram and 'sister' of Aaron simply indicates that the mother of Jesus belonged by birth to the Levite religious aristocracy of Israel.

2 Mary was a *Siddiqah* (5:17), which possibly means that she belonged to the community of the Sadducees. As a priestly caste mentioned in the Gospels and known to have flourished as a sect in Hellenistic Palestine until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, the Sadducees denied the immortality of the soul, bodily resurrection after death, and the existence of angelic spirits. Of the Jewish scriptures, they only accepted the authority of the Torah. Of the antiquity of the sect, nothing is known. In the Koran, however, two of the patriarchs of Israel, Abraham and Joseph, are described as *Siddiqin (cf. Hebrew sdqym,* for 'Sadducees'), which may imply that the Sadducees were not a Jewish sect of late emergence, as is commonly supposed, but rather represented the continuation into Hellenistic times of the original Israelite monotheism of the Hebrew patriarchs and of Moses, out of which Judaism and the original Christianity eventually developed as two different sects.

3 The mother of Mary vowed her daughter to the service of God before she was born (3:33-7).

4 Mary was the elect of God among women (3:42).

5 She was a quietly obedient believer (21:91).

6 She was a miraculous being (23:50).

7 She was endowed with the gift of divination (3:44).

8 When the time came for her to serve in the inner sanctum of the temple (Arabic *al-mihrab),* there was a dispute as to who would have the honour to be her sponsor (Arabic *kafil),* and lots had to be cast to decide the matter (3:44).

9 The person who succeeded in becoming her sponsor was Zechariah *{Zakariyya,* 3:37), the father of the prophet Yahya *(Yahya,* 3:38ff.; 19:2ff.; 21:89ff.). This prophet, whose name is known only from the Koran, has been identified, traditionally, as being none other than the John the Baptist of the Gospels, although *Yahya* and *Yuhanan* (the original Aramaic for 'John') are entirely different names.

10 Every time Zechariah entered the temple, he found Mary miraculously endowed with material provisions (Arabic *rizq),* and she explained to him that these provisions were given her by God (3:37).

11 One day, Mary donned the veil (Arabic *hijab),* left her folk, and went to dwell somewhere 'eastwards' from her home country (19:16). There, the 'spirit' (Arabic *ruh)* of God appeared to her as a man, announcing to her that she would bear a child, who was Issa, although she was still a virgin (19:17-21). Elsewhere, it is said in the Koran that the news of Mary's virgin pregnancy was announced to her by the 'angels' (3:45-7). In two other passages (21:91; 66:12), it is stressed that Mary made a great issue of maintaining her virginity intact, and only became pregnant when God blew his spirit into her.

12 The divine agency responsible for the pregnancy of Mary was the prophetic *kalimah,* or 'word' (4:171).

13 Mary gave birth to Issa in a 'distant place', by the trunk of a palm tree, feeding freely from the ripe dates as they fell to the ground (19:25).

14 The Jews spoke great ill of her (4:156), presumably because she gave birth to a child without being married.

15 Her family were appalled when she returned to them with her new-born child, whom they naturally assumed to be the product of illicit intercourse, and upbraided her for what

they thought she had done. The baby Issa, however, immediately addressed his scandalized kinsfolk, explaining to them that he was no ordinary child, but would be a man of God and a prophet entrusted with the delivery of a special divine message (19:27–30).

16 Subsequently, Mary and her son Issa came to be worshipped jointly as 'two gods' (Arabic *ilahayn)* subservient to the supreme God, although Issa himself had never wanted this to happen and considered it wrong (5:116).

This rich Koranic information concerning Mary adds further dimensions to the figure of Issa – the Koranic 'Jesus'. Besides being an ordained Israelite *muqarrab* (see above), he was, discounting the story of his virgin birth, a Levite of the house of Aaron descended through his mother from the Israelite priestly aristocracy. The period of his mission was shortly after the time of a priest called Zechariah – certainly not the Biblical prophet whose career coincided with the early reign of Darius I in Persia (522–486 BC), but perhaps one of the later figures by the same name mentioned in the Hebrew Bible for the post-exilic period – why not the prominent Israelite priest called Zechariah son of Jonathan who participated with Ezra in the purification of the walls of Jerusalem (in my opinion, the original West Arabian Jerusalem) in 457 BC? (Nehemiah 12:35, 41). Ezra, we know, had returned from Babylonia to Jerusalem the year before, in the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes I (464–24 BC) (Ezra 7:7), more towards the end than the beginning of his teaching and preaching career which laid the foundations of Judaism (7:10). Assuming that the Zechariah who was the temple sponsor of the Koranic Mary was actually the priest Zechariah son of Jonathan, who was Ezra's contemporary, the Koranic Issa Ibn Maryam would have been religiously active in Arabia in the late fifth or early fourth century BC.

If Issa was in fact a Sadducee, and therefore a strict follower of the original Israelite monotheism, which is what the Koran suggests his mother was, his preaching in that particular period could have represented an archaic religious reaction to Ezra's innovative reforms. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra is described as a descendant of Aaron (Ezra 7:1–7). The

Koranic Issa apparently claimed the same descent on his mother's side (see above). This implies that the two men, descended from the same priestly aristocracy, had equal claims to Israelite religious authority, each in his own time – hence the bitterness with which the Jewish followers of Ezra opposed the preaching of Issa, as we find it reported in the Koran.

In the absence of the needed records, the history of Judaism during the three centuries following the career of Ezra remains virtually unknown. In all probability, the career of the Koranic Issa belongs to this same dark period of Israelite and Jewish history, and the only available clues to help date it are those that survive in the text of the Koran. While the story of Issa that transpires from this text remains univerifiable by other evidence, its marked internal consistency points to its authenticity. Certainly, the story could not have been pure fabrication, and this alone makes it worthy of serious consideration. Apparently, there was a Christianity in Arabia - that of the *Nasara,* or 'Nazarenes' – which was several centuries older than the one which relates to the historical Jesus of the Gospels: a primordial Christianity which survived on its original home ground certainly until the coming of Islam. The Koran assumes it to be the true Christianity, and asserts that its founder, Issa Ibn Maryam, was the true Jesus who did not die on the cross. On the other hand, the Koran implicitly recognizes the existence of another brand of Christianity – allegedly a false one – whose followers, in grave error, worshipped the same 'Jesus' as a god, maintaining that he was actually crucified. This claim is roundly dismissed in the Koran as a delusion.

We already know, however, that there was in fact a historical Jesus who was put to death on the cross in about AD 30: a Jesus who was allegedly a descendant of David, not of Aaron, and therefore belonged to the Israelite tribe of Judah, not to the tribe of Levi. This Jesus could not have been the son of a woman called Mary, and at the same time have a maternal aunt with the same name, as the Gospel of John asserts. Moreover, he was called Jeshu, not Issa, and the little that can be known about him comes basically from the Christian Gospels, where he is certainly given some of the

attributes of the older Issa. Matthew, Mark and Luke, for example, assert that his mother was called Mary, Matthew and Luke pointing out that this Mary was still a virgin when she conceived him. John gives the man other important attributes of the Koranic Issa, as we shall soon discover; and so does Luke. All four Gospels call him the Son of God – an appellation which, according to the Koran, was attributed to Issa by his followers in grave error. How much more do the Gospels confuse between the Jesus who was Jeshu, and the one who was Issa? More important, what was the source of their information about the older, original 'Jesus', considering that it could not have been the existing text of the Koran, but a text or tradition which was much more ancient?

5 The Lost Gospel of Waraqah Ibn Nawfal

AMONG the Christians of pre-Islamic Arabia, Waraqah Ibn Nawfal is the one best remembered in Islamic tradition. He was an ordained priest (Arabic *qass*) closely related to Muhammad's wife Khadijah, and already advanced in years when Muhammad began to preach Islam in Mecca in about AD 610. The sources describe him as an avid reader of 'the Torah and the Gospel' who had long been expecting the appearance of a prophet of the Arab race. When Muhammad had his first Koranic revelation, which left him at a loss what to do, his wife Khadijah, it is said, took him to consult with Waraqah. Waraqah immediately recognized his revelations as genuine, and gave him all the moral encouragement he needed. Shortly after, Waraqah died; but long after he was dead, Muhammad reportedly continued to see him in his dreams, robed in pure white – perhaps after the manner of the Koranic *Hawariyyun*. The Prophet of Islam, we are told, was convinced that the saintly Christian priest and scholar – the first person to recognize the truth of his mission – was one non-Muslim who had surely been admitted to Paradise.

One well-known Islamic reference to Waraqah is by al-Bukhari – an Islamic scholar of the ninth century AD who collected oral and written traditions concerning the life and sayings of Muhammad, some of which are also found in earlier works. Writing about the Prophet's first meeting with Waraqah, al-Bukhari noted that he used to 'write Hebrew'; also, that he used to make copies of the Gospel (*al-Injil,* in the singular) 'in Hebrew'. In the Arabic usage of the period, 'Hebrew' (Arabic *'Ibrani*) could have meant either Biblical Hebrew or Aramaic. For the term often indicated the common script in which the two related languages could be written, rather than the language itself. In pre-exilic Biblical times

(i.e. before the destruction of the Biblical kingdom of Judah and the exile of its Israelite population to Babylon in c.586 BC), there were Israelites who were conversant in Aramaic as well as Hebrew (e.g. 2 Kings 18:26). But Hebrew, being the language understood by all, was the one they preferred to write. Later, in post-exilic times, Aramaic rapidly replaced Hebrew as the common Israelite language, and the Hebrew script was maintained for it - hence its use for both the Hebrew and the Aramaic parts of the books of Ezra and Daniel, and also for the translation of the older Hebrew scriptures into Aramaic.

The Gospel which still existed in Arabia in the seventh century AD – the one used by Waraqah Ibn Nawfal – was most probably written in Aramaic, not Hebrew. Of this lost Aramaic Gospel, nothing can be directly known unless its text is one day rediscovered; but one may safely assume that the story it related about Jesus was not much different from the one reconstructed in the preceding chapter from the text of the Koran. It must have been the Gospel of the Nazarenes, whose Jesus was the Koranic Issa, not the Jeshu of Paul and the Greek Gospels. If this had not been the case, the Koran could not have made the claim that its account of the career of Issa was identical with that of the one authentic *Injil* without exposing this claim to serious challenge. It would certainly not have spoken of Christian 'priests and hermits' recognizing the truth of the Koran, and weeping to hear it recited to them (see chapter 4), unless there were known instances when this had happened.

Islamic traditions recorded as early as the eighth century AD, and purporting to relate first-hand information, indicate that the same Gospel (in its original Aramaic? in translation?) still existed in Muhammad's time in Ethiopia (known to the Arabs as *al-Habashah,* or 'Abyssinia'). A number of the Prophet's early followers were at one time persecuted in Mecca and fled across the Red Sea to seek refuge in that country. But their Meccan enemies immediately sent word to warn the Ethiopian king (called the Negus) that the Muslim fugitives had abandoned the faith of their forefathers and emigrated to his country without seeking to convert to his religion and become Christians, as was proper for them to do.

According to Ibn Ishaq, who wrote the earliest known biography of Muhammad, the Negus thereupon summoned the fugitives to his presence and questioned them on the matter, while his leading bishops stood in attendance armed with their scriptures. In response, the spokesman of the Muslim group recited to him the chapter from the Koran which speaks of Jesus as Issa Ibn Maryam. The original reporter from whom Ibn Ishaq took the story says:*

> By God, the Negus wept until his beard became wet. His bishops also wept n hearing what was recited to them, until their scriptures became soaked. The Negus then said: 'This and what Jesus taught must come from the same niche of light!' . . . Then, hitting the ground with his hand, he picked up a twig of wood and said: 'By God, there is no more to Jesus in addition to what you have said than the measure of this twig!'

By the time of Muhammad, apostolic Christianity (as we may call the Christianity of Paul and the Gospels) was already firmly established in the Roman or Byzantine world and its immediate peripheries, albeit according to somewhat different interpretations; and earlier forms of the religion had long been giving way to the new, as missionaries went out to preach the apostolic faith in different countries. One of these missionaries, Frumentius (AD c.300-c.380), was the man credited with the introduction of the faith to Ethiopia, while others were apparently active from the same time on the other side of the Red Sea, in Arabia. In both these lands, however, it appears that Christianity was already known in its older, Nazarene, form before the arrival of the missionaries. The new preaching was successful only to the extent that it could secure adequate political and material backing from Byzantium. Even where success was achieved, it appears that the older faith was overpowered but not immediately and entirely eradicated. There is actually evidence to this effect

* What lends special credence to this report is that it quotes some of the words (especially the interjections) of the Negus as he spoke them in his own language, sometimes explaining what they meant in Arabic, and sometimes leaving them unexplained, apparently because they were originally not understood by the Arabs who heard and reported them.

from certain Israelite practices which were maintained by the Ethiopian Christians, some of them to the present day: for example, ritual circumcision; the keeping of Saturday as the Sabbath; the adherence to the law of the Torah, particularly with respect to clean and unclean food; the maintenance in the Ethiopian churches of the Ark of the Covenant, which was carried by the Ethiopian army when it went into battle.

In Arabia as in Ethiopia, the triumph of apostolic Christianity over the older Nazarene faith must have begun in the fourth century, in the wake of the conversion of the Roman empire. In both lands, however, there were apparently die-hard Nazarenes who stuck to their old ways. These Nazarenes must have been overcome with despondency as they saw their old faith overwhelmed by the new Christian preaching. But they must have taken heart again when Islam emerged on the scene to reaffirm the veracity of their original Gospel, recognizing their Issa as the one and only true Jesus. Little wonder that Waraqah Ibn Nawfal so readily confirmed the truth of Muhammad's revelations, and that other Christian 'priests and hermits' in the Hijaz wept tears of joy when they heard the Koranic passages concerning Jesus recited to them. Judging by the testimony of Ibn Ishaq, the same was the case among the Christians of Ethiopia.

Rather than being a text of later authorship than the four canonical Gospels (as were the numerous Greek and Coptic apocryphal gospels), the Gospel of the Arabian and Ethiopian Nazarenes, originally written in Aramaic, must have been a much older one. Perhaps it dated as far back as the fourth or fifth century BC – the period of the Koranic Issa, of whose life and career it provided the principal record. Did Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, writing in the latter decades of the first century AD, know of the existence of this ancient text? Did Paul become acquainted with it when he visited Arabia immediately following his conversion?

Most probably, what prompted Paul to undertake his visit to Arabia so urgently was his knowledge – or at least suspicion that the Jesus who died on the cross in Jerusalem originally came from Arabia – perhaps the Hijaz. Paul would have been curious to discover something concerning the Arabian background of this Jesus. During his stay in Arabia,

he could have come across the local Aramaic Gospel which spoke of the Jesus who was Issa, not Jeshu. Judging by the testimony of the Koran, this Issa was regarded as an Israelite Messiah, or Christ, although he was descended - certainly through his mother – from the priestly house of Aaron, not from the royal house of David. Hence his followers were in a sense pre-Christian 'Christians'. Normally, the Israelite Messiah was expected to be a scion of David's house; but there were Israelite sects who held the special notion of a messianic pair: a priestly Messiah of the house of Aaron, and a royal Messiah of the house of David. One such sect was the so-called Qumran community, whose scriptures are preserved in the Dead Sea scrolls. Thus, the belief of the Nazarenes in Issa as an Aaronic, priestly Messiah, or Christ, did not necessarily exclude the expectation of another, royal Messiah of the house of David.

Perhaps Paul even acquired a copy of the Gospel of the Nazarenes during his stay in Arabia – one of the precious books of 'parchment' he was so anxious to have sent to him in prison in his last years (2 Timothy 4:13). Apart from this Gospel, there were also the local traditions which honoured the Jesus who was Issa, not only as a Christ, but also as the Son of God, the eternal God in person, or one of a number of deities – heretical concepts of Issa which the Koran made a point of condemning as false, which means that they were still current in Arabia during the seventh century AD. Perhaps there were other old Arabian scriptures which spoke of Issa in these terms, and of which Paul managed also to secure copies on 'parchment', subsequently using them to develop his own theory of Jesus as the transcendental Christ and Son of God of all time, in addition to being a historical figure of a particular period.

To facilitate our investigation from this point, we must agree on a convention. Whenever we refer to the Jesus of the Nazarene Gospel and the Koran, we shall call him 'Issa', which is his proper name. When speaking of the Jesus who died on the cross in Jerusalem, we shall call him 'Jeshu', by his first name, or by his surname once we have discovered it. When the Jesus spoken of by Paul and the Greek Gospels is clearly this same Jeshu, we shall also call him 'Jeshu'. When

we speak of Jesus as 'Jesus', it will only be to indicate the accepted Christian concept of Jesus as the historical or eternal Christ.

Having learnt in Arabia about the Issa of the Nazarene Gospel, Paul could not have failed to notice that the apostles preaching the Nazarene Way in Jerusalem in his time were determined to identify their Jeshu with this Issa: the son of Joseph the Carpenter, who had surviving brothers and sisters, with the only son of the virgin Mary; the 'Jesus' descended from David with the 'Jesus' who was not; the one who was crucified in Jerusalem with the one who died a natural death in Arabia and was believed to have been assumed to heaven. Paul, however, did not publicize what he came to know, for fear that it would endanger the survival of the new faith he proclaimed; also, because he himself was determined to elaborate a theory of Jesus as the transcend- ental and eternal Christ by giving Jeshu, as a historical figure of his own age, the esoteric rather than historical attributes of Issa – a figure of a much earlier period.

To present Jeshu as the eternal Christ, Paul had good reason to remain silent about the question of Issa. On the other hand, he could not afford to speak much of the historical career of Jeshu, and at the same time identify him as the only Christ Jesus, when this attribute legitimately belonged to someone else, whose historical existence could easily be dicovered by anyone willing to make the effort. The best way out of this embarrassment was to speak of the historical career of Jeshu as little as possible. Thus, in Paul's writings, Christ emerges mainly as a Jesus of faith, with only the barest passing references to his human person as an Israelite, a follower of the law of Moses, and a scion of the house of David.

Before attempting to demonstrate the extent to which Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were directly or indirectly acquainted with the contents of the lost Nazarene Gospel of Issa, something must be said about current views regarding these four canonical Gospels and their sources. Three of them – the so-called 'Synoptic' Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke – are basically composed of parallel accounts of the career of Jesus, with some variations in the details. John, however,

commonly referred to as the 'Fourth Gospel', stands on its own in a number of essential respects. At one time, this Gospel was considered to be, historically, the least authoritative, representing a relatively late Greek tradition and bearing the strong marks of Hellenistic gnosticism. More recently, however, a number of scholars have come to view it, even with its gnostic content, as the most 'Aramaic' of the Gospels, and the one preserving the oldest traditions.

Of the three 'Synoptic' Gospels, Mark is recognizably the oldest. What it says about Jesus is also found in Matthew and Luke, while the reverse is not true. This indicates that Mark, in one way or another, provided source material for Matthew and Luke. Because these two other Gospels are in agreement not only where they draw on Mark, but also in some other respects, scholars have naturally assumed that Matthew and Luke used another, unknown common source (German *Quelle*), commonly referred to as Q. In the two Gospels, however, there are accounts which are exclusive to Matthew, and others which are exclusive to Luke. For this reason, the prevailing view today is that Matthew drew independently on a separate source or tradition conventionally called M, while Luke used another independent source conventionally called L. While Q is generally believed to represent a lost Greek source, some suggest that M and L were probably older, Aramaic sources. (See figure 1.)

Assuming that the Gospel of John does in fact represent an old Aramaic tradition, and that the M used by Matthew, or the L used by Luke, were actually Aramaic sources, it may be possible that any of these three traditions or sources somehow derived from the Aramaic Gospel of Issa which still existed in the Hijaz in the seventh century AD. To gain insight into this matter, one may proceed from the premise that the Jesus of lost Arabian Gospel – the one used by Waraqah Ibn Nawfal – was identical with the Koranic Issa, as already suggested, and determine on this basis the extent to which attributes of the Koranic Issa and stories told about him are found in Matthew, Luke or John, but not in Mark.

For example, Mark concentrates on the active career of Jeshu, saying nothing about his infancy or adolescence, and making no reference to his virgin birth – a point on which the

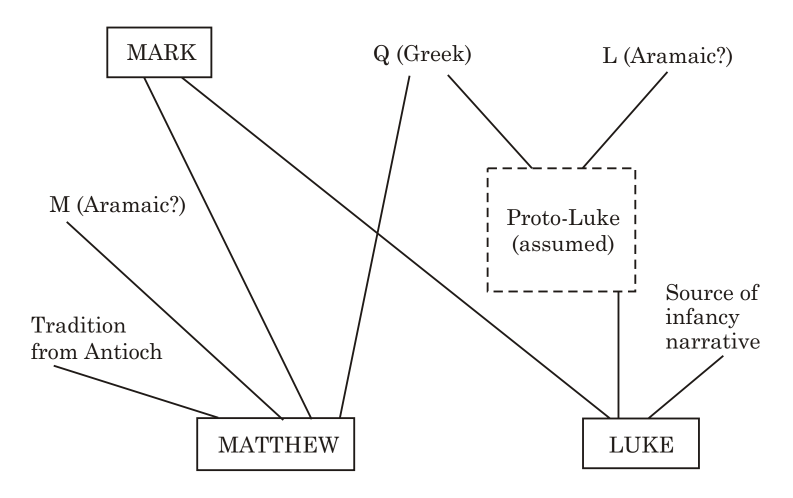


Figure 1 *Documentary theory of the Synoptic Gospels, as suggested by H. B. Streeter (1925)*

Koran makes a great issue. John, also, says nothing about the virgin birth and infancy of Jeshu. Matthew and Luke, however, do speak of both subjects. While these two Gospels trace the descent of Jeshu from David through his father Joseph, albeit with some variation (Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-31), they equally insist that his mother Mary became pregnant with him and also delivered him when still a virgin, which implies that Joseph was not actually his father. To gloss over this contradiction, Luke (1:27) points out that Mary was engaged to Joseph at the time of her virgin pregnancy with Jeshu; while Matthew (1:18) speaks of her as the betrothed of Joseph, certainly at the time when the baby was born.

The insistence in Matthew and Luke on the virgin birth of Jeshu need not have been directly derived from the lost Nazarene Gospel. In the case of Matthew, the open reference was to Old Testament prophecy. Also, the peculiar story of the birth and infancy of Jesus told in Matthew is completely unlike that of the Koran, which means that it did not derive from the Nazarene Gospel. Therefore M, as the source exclusive to Matthew, was not this Gospel. The story told by Luke concerning the virgin pregnancy of Mary and the birth

of Jeshu is, however, identical with the one which the Koran relates concerning Issa in a number of essential respects. For example:

1 The Koran (3:42–9; 19:17–21) says that the spirit of God appeared to Mary in human form, which greatly disturbed her. When the angel (or angels) saluted her as the elect of God among all women, announcing to her that she would give birth to a baby boy, she wondered how that could happen when she was still an intact virgin; but she was assured that God had the power to make this possible, and that her son would be a miraculous being, and a great apostle to Israel. The Gospel of Luke (1:26–35), in his own story of the so-called 'Annunciation' to Mary, repeats this information almost word for word.

2 In the chapter of the Koran that carries the name of Mary (*Surat Maryam*), the story of the miraculous birth of Issa to Mary (19:16–34) is immediately preceded by the story of the miraculous birth of the prophet Yahya to the aged priest Zechariah and his old and barren wife (19:1–15). The same must have been the case in the lost Nazarene Gospel. Luke introduces his Christmas story in exactly the same manner (1:5–25).

3 In speaking of Mary as the mother of Issa, the Koran clearly indicates that she belonged to the Levite priestly aristocracy of the Israelites, where she is identified as the 'sister' of Aaron and the 'daughter' of Amram (see chapter 4). Luke does not explicitly indicate this. But, while speaking of Zechariah, Luke says two things about this priest which the Koran omits. First, Luke indicates that Zechariah's wife, who was called Elizabeth, belonged as he did to a priestly family (1:5), which means that she was no less a Levite of the priestly house of Aaron than he was. Second, he says that this same Elizabeth was a 'cousin' to Mary (1:36), which means that Mary was also a Levite of the house of Aaron. This would have probably been the case even if the two women were cousins on their mothers' rather than their fathers' side, considering that the Israelite law forbids intermarriage between the tribes when the woman happens to have any inheritance (Numbers 36:6–8). Thus, the text of Luke's

Christmas story does imply that Mary belonged to the priestly house of Aaron, although it omits to actually say this about her.

The fact remains, however, that the Koran speaks of Zechariah as the father of the prophet Yahya, who was an older contemporary of the prophet Issa. Luke, on the other hand, presents the same Zechariah as the father of John the Baptist – an older contemporary of Jeshu whose historical existence is fully attested. According to all four Gospels, and also to the near-contemporary Jewish historian Josephus, this John was a prominent religious preacher in Palestine who was unjustly put to death by Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea (AD 4-39). Apart from Luke, none of the other Gospels speak of the man as the son of a priest called Zechariah, nor does Josephus give him such an identification.

Barring the confusion between Issa and Jeshu, and between Yahya and John the Baptist, Luke, in his Christmas story, must have taken his information directly from the lost Nazarene Gospel, including the special information he gives concerning the identity and lineage of Elizabeth, who is left unnamed in the Koran. The one glaring omission in Luke is his failure to point out specifically that Mary, no less than her 'cousin' Elizabeth, was a Levite of the house of Aaron. Considering the total silence in Luke, as in the other Gospels, about the priestly lineage of Mary, this omission in Luke's Christmas story must have been intentional. Carelessly, however, Luke gave the secret away by mentioning the relationship of close kinship between Mary and Elizabeth. Luke was definitely acquainted with what the Nazarene Gospel had originally said about the Levitical linage of Mary, the mother of Issa, but he chose not to refer to it possibly because the mother of Jeshu, whatever her name was, was known not to be of Levitical descent. In fact, considering the Israelite ban on intermarriage between the tribes, Jeshu's mother could hardly have been a Levite if her husband Joseph was a scion of the royal house of Judah, unless the two of them (or at least the wife) had been destitute.

Modern scholars have assumed that the story of the virgin

birth of Jesus was a 'late' tradition which somehow found its way into the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but not into those of Mark and John. In Luke, however, the tradition would seem to be an old one, originally relating to the birth of the Jesus who was Issa, centuries before it came to be ascribed to the Jesus who was Jeshu. And this view receives support, in fact, from the textual criticism of the New Testament material.

Luke, it has been noticed, begins his account of the life of Jesus with an introduction in fluent Greek, in which he dedicates his work to the enigmatic Theophilus (1:1–4), Then quite suddenly the fluency ends and a more fumbling style begins as Luke starts to relate his Christmas story (1:5). This less eloquent style continues to the end of the Christmas narrative when the fluency of the introduction is resumed. Judging solely by the change of style, some scholars have suggested that the Christmas story in Luke must be a translation from a written source which was probably in Aramaic. In the light of this, we are not so wide of the mark in our own analysis, which has taken content rather than style into account. Certainly, the story of the virgin birth of Jesus was no 'late' tradition, if Luke had to translate it from an older text which was clearly not Greek.

In his surviving epistles, as already noted, Paul does not explicitly attribute virgin birth to Jeshu. In one instance, however, he does make a subtle allusion to the matter by speaking of the man as the son of a human mother (literally, 'made of a woman', Galatians 4:4), without mentioning a father. This indicates that Paul knew of the tradition concerning Issa as the virgin-born son of Mary, but preferred not to ascribe this tradition explicitly to Jeshu whom he knew to be the normally born son of Joseph the Carpenter, descended from David in the regular male line. Slurring deftly over the issue, he made a point of omitting all mention of the father of Jeshu, and also of leaving his mother unnamed. Likewise, the Gospel of John, as has been repeatedly observed, gives no name to the mother of Jeshu, and avoids all mention of the virgin birth.

Indeed, it seems likely that John was no less familiar than Paul with the Aramaic Gospel of Issa, as we shall sub-

sequently discover (chapter 6). He called Jeshu the *logos,* or 'Word' (l:lff.; cf. the Koranic *kalimah).* He also spoke of a promise made by this Jeshu of a *parakletos* ('Comforter' or 'Helper', literally 'one called aside for help', 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) who would follow him (cf. the Koranic *Ahmad,* from the common Semitic verbal root *hmd* in the attested Arabic sense of 'satisfaction, contentment'). Judging by the testimony of the Koran, these two concepts originally derived from the one and only true *Injil* – the Nazarene Gospel which spoke of Issa, not of Jeshu. As far as can be determined, however, Paul never mentioned the *logos* and the *parakletos* in speaking of Jeshu, or in formulating his special concept of Jesus as the Christ. Instead, he gave the man esoteric attributes of divinity or quasi-divinity which, according to the repeated insistence of the Koran, were erroneous and pernicious concepts of Issa preached by false gospels and traditions, but not by the one and only authentic *Injil*.

In short, John knew the Aramaic Gospel which spoke about Issa and made use of it in writing his own Gospel about Jeshu. The same was the case with Luke. Paul, on the other hand, though equally knowledgeable of the contents of this Nazarene Gospel, made no use of it in constructing the image of Jeshu as the eternal Jesus Christ, the only Son of God. Instead, he used traditions deriving from some Arabian source other than the Nazarene Gospel. Perhaps Paul was not particularly enthused by the Issa of this Gospel who, judging by the Koran, was a strict Israelite monotheist in the tradition of Moses and Aaron and hardly a Christly figure, except for the fact that he was miraculously born and performed miracles. Paul preferred to model his Christ after a figure of a more esoteric and mystical tradition.

Let us suppose, at this point, that Paul brought back from Arabia not one Aramaic Gospel, but at least two, which he kept strictly to himself, never divulging the secret to his followers. He carefully studied both Gospels, but only used one of them in constructing his image of Jeshu as Jesus Christ. In his last years, as he languished in prison expecting execution, he anxiously asked for these books of 'parchment' to be sent to him - perhaps to see to it that they were destroyed, lest anyone should discover them after his death.

Paul, however, died or was put to death before receiving his secret books, which remained in existence long enough for the Gospel writers to use them – some reading them in their original Aramaic, and others in fumbling translations or adaptations into Greek. Luke made use of the book which spoke of the Nazarene prophet Issa the one Paul did not particularly care for. This was what modern scholars suspect to have been his L source – an Aramaic one, as has generally been reckoned. John used this same source, but in a different way. It is commonly believed today that his Gospel also had an Aramaic prototype – apparently none other than the suspected L of Luke. What gives the secret away in the case of John is his talk of the *logos* and *parakletos.*

One may try to reverse the argument on this last point by assuming that the *kalimah* and *Ahmad* of the Koran are borrowings from John, rather than the *logos* and *parakletos* of John being borrowings from the lost Aramaic Gospel which the Koran speaks of as the authentic *Injil.* In the case of Luke, however, such an argument cannot hold. As already observed, Luke was definitely acquainted with the information concerning the Levitical lineage of Mary, the mother of Issa, as we find it preserved in the Koran; yet he made a deliberate (though imperfect) attempt to suppress what he knew of this matter as he first set out to identify this Mary with the mother of the Jeshu whose story he wanted to relate. Had the Koranic story of the birth of Issa been a borrowing from Luke, there would have been no reference to Mary's lineage in it. Add to this the fact that the Koran speaks of Mary's son as Issa, not Jeshu, and of Zechariah's son as Yahya, not John (Aramaic *Yuhanan,* Christian Arabic *Yuhanna)** without in any way indicating that Yahya was a practitioner of ritual baptism.

The matter is all above board; no scholarly sleight of hand is involved. The 'Jesus' of the canonical Gospels – certainly in Luke and John – is not one person, but a fusion of two historical figures: one of them the Jeshu claiming descent

* The names *Yahya* and *Yuhanan* actually derive from two different roots: the first from what is in Aramaic *hya,* meaning 'live', and the second from *hnan,* 'have mercy, compassion'. But Christian Arab traditio;: in Islamic times continued to confuse them.

from David, who was crucified in Jerusalem under Pilate; the other Issa, an Israelite religious figure who was probably active in Arabia not long after the time of Ezra – i.e. in the late fifth or early fourth century BC. The clue to this comes from the Koran, which presents the story of Issa as the true 'Jesus' of the one and only authentic *Injil,* insisting that the 'Jesus' who died on the cross was someone else. Moreover, there is the fact that an Aramaic Gospel – one of which nothing today is known – was still in use in the Arabian land of the Hijaz in Muhammad's time: the Nazarene Gospel read and copied time and again in the *'Ibrani* script by a local Christian priest called Waraqah Ibn Nawfal, which was apparently also known at the same time in Ethiopia either in its original Aramaic, or in translation. Was the fusion between Jeshu and Issa done by the Gospel writers in good faith, and in ignorance of the facts, or was it done in full knowledge of the truth, with an intent to deceive?

6 How Much Did John Know?

THE story, so far, has unfolded as follows. When Luke and John began to write their Gospels, Christianity was already spreading in different parts of the Roman world, blending the Nazarene teachings of the Jerusalem apostles with the more sophisticated teachings of Paul. Originally, the Nazarenes were followers of Issa – an Arabian Israelite prophet who had preached in his time a liberal interpretation of the law of Moses within the context of strict Israelite monotheism. Certainly, this is how he is depicted in the Koran. The Jeshu of the Greek Gospels, to the extent that he was a religious rather than a political figure, could well have been the leader of a Nazarene religious revival. Indeed, there is a hint to the effect that he was a Nazarene (*Nazaraios*) in one Gospel (Matthew 2:23).

In any case, following the death of this Jeshu, his disciples in Jerusalem propagated an esoteric identification of his person with that of Issa – the original prophet on whose teachings their Nazarene *hodos,* or Way was based. The very fact that they called themselves the 'Way' suggests that they were organized as a fraternity practising a mystic cult, rather than regular followers of a prophetic canon. Historically, and to this day, the Arabic term for Sufi cults which follow mystical interpretations of the Islamic canon is none other than *tariqah,* meaning a 'way'.

To succeed in propagating their esoteric preaching about their Jeshu, the leaders of the Nazarene Way had to slur over factual history. For this reason, they kept quiet about the historical existence of the Issa who was the founder of the original Nazarene community in Arabia. Paul, however, became a party to their secret when he visited Arabia and acquired a copy of the original Nazarene Gospel – the

Aramaic one which was still used by the Nazarene Waraqah Ibn Nawfal in the days of Muhammad. Having read this Gospel and discovered that its Issa was no more than a Israelite prophet of the regular sort, except that he worked miracles (to him, a matter of 'Jewish legend'), he decided to pay no further attention to the text. Instead, he went on to develop his personal vision of Jeshu as the eternal Christ Jesus. The more primitive followers of the Nazarene Way opposed his complicated preaching for no less than seventeen years (three before his first visit to Jerusalem; fourteen more between the first visit and the second). But the Jerusalem apostles ultimately conceded that a reconciliation between their own simpler preaching and his was possible. Thus we read in the second epistle attributed to one of their leaders (2 Peter 3:14–16):

> And so, my friends, as you wait for that Day, do your best to be pure and faultless in God's sight and to be at peace with him. Look on our Lord's patience as the opportunity he is giving you to be saved, *just as our dear brother Paul wrote to you, using the wisdom that God gave him.* This is what he says in all his letters when he writes on the subject. *There are some difficult things in his letters which ignorant and unstable people explain falsely,* as they do with other passages of the Scriptures. So they bring on their own destruction.

Clearly, the preaching of Paul, though done with great conviction and with the best intentions, had resulted in considerable confusion among the early followers of the Christian faith. This confusion is amply attested to in the book of Acts, and also in the writings of Paul himself; for example, where he says (1 Corinthians 1:12–13):

> each one of you says something different. One says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Peter'; and another, 'I follow Christ.' Christ has been divided into groups! Was it Paul who died on the cross for you? Were you baptized as Paul's disciples?

After the death of Paul, there was obviously an urgent need

to restore unity in the Christian ranks; and this, it appears, was what the authors of the four canonical Gospels intended to do, as they set out to construct accounts of the earthly mission of the Christ Jesus which reconciled different views of his historical and metaphysical identity. Luke made one such attempt, and John another. Both of them had access to Paul's copy of the Nazarene Gospel which they used as a source. Neither of them appears to have realized that Paul himself had never depended much on the authority of this Aramaic text, having noticed that the Issa it spoke of – the son of Mary – was not the Jeshu whose gospel he wanted to preach.

Reading the Nazarene Gospel in the original Aramaic, either directly or with the assistance of a translator, Luke and John became equally acquainted with its contents. The two men, however, made use of this same document in different ways, each as he thought best. Luke had a special partiality for good stories, picking them up wherever he found them. Writing in simple faith, his chief concern was to produce a readable and informative narrative. Luke, however, was uncritical in handling his sources, frequently copying from them word by word with little attempt at proper collation. For example, in the book of Acts which he wrote as a sequel to his Gospel, he reproduced the story of Paul from various traditions and texts, episode by episode, giving the composite work the unity of his own Greek style, but doing little to cover up the seams between the different parts which remained clearly detectable. Thus, while he related most of his account in the third person, he kept the 'we-sections' in the first person plural, exactly as he discovered them in a diary of one of Paul's travelling companions (see chapter 1). Earlier, in writing his Gospel, Luke took most of his Christmas story from the Nazarene Gospel, again reproducing the original in Greek translation almost verbatim (see chapter 5). He seems to have even failed to realize that his source in this case was not concerned with the Jeshu whose story he intended to relate, but with another man by another name who lived approximately four centuries earlier. By the time Luke set out to write his Gospel, the name of his Jeshu had already passed into Greek as *Iesous*. The Issa of the Nazarene Gospel could also be spoken of in Greek as *Iesous*.

Luke was apparently convinced that the two men were the same person about whom different sources and traditions told different stories; so he made a free selection of these stories and proceeded to fuse them into one account.

John, however, was different from Luke; like Paul, he was a highly perceptive person with a complicated mind. When he read about Issa in the Nazarene Gospel which had once belonged to Paul, he would have realized that this was not the same person as Jeshu. Since the days of the Nazarene apostles, however, Christians had been taught that the Christ Jesus of their faith was none other than the 'son of Mary' – i.e. the same person as the Issa originally followed by the Nazarenes in Arabia, to whom tradition attributed the performance of great miracles, including the raising of the dead to life (chapter 4). They had also been led or left to believe that their Christ Jesus was born in Palestine, in Nazareth or in Bethlehem, and that he spent his entire life there.

John had no wish to shake any of the established beliefs among his fellow Christians. Instead, he reinforced these beliefs by giving his Jeshu some of the more notable characteristics of Issa, following the authority of the original Nazarene Gospel. On the other hand, realizing that there were in fact two 'Jesuses', not one, John was careful to conceal his presentation of them as one person by judicious collation.

Perhaps he also felt that he should remain correct on certain cardinal points, at least to be honest with himself. For example, John knew that Mary was the mother of Issa; also that the mother of Jeshu was not called Mary, which was the name of her sister. Therefore, as he spoke of the two men as one person, he never mentioned the name of the mother, although he made no less than four references to her in his Gospel. Since John knew the name of the maternal aunt of Jeshu (see chapter 3), he must also have known the name of Jeshu's mother. The established Christian belief in Mary as the mother of the Christ Jesus, however, was not one to be easily trifled with. The best John could do under the circumstances was to ignore her name altogether.

John must have likewise thought it pointless to add confusion to an already confused issue by attributing the

virgin birth of Issa to the Jeshu who was well known to be a descendant of David in the male line. Luke, in his own Gospel, asserted the male descent of Jeshu from David through his father, while at the same time attributing to him virgin birth. It was typical of Luke to leave such glaring contradictions in his work. John, being more circumspect, said nothing about the birth of Jeshu or his genealogy. He considered it safer to remain silent on this thorny subject.

On the other hand, John, no less than Paul, was determined to present his Jeshu as a historical figure who was more than an ordinary human being. Paul, as we have seen, had depicted him as the eternal Christ of all time. John, for his part, took the notion of the *kalimah* from the Nazarene Gospel of Issa, rendered the term in Greek as *logos,* or 'Word', and elaborated the idea as he understood it, with respect to Jeshu, as follows (Johnl:l–14):

> Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out. . . The Word was in the world, and though God made the world through him, yet the world did not recognize him . . . The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son.

In the original Nazarene Gospel, a term spelt *klmh* (vocalized in Arabic to read *kalimah,* as in the Koran) was apparently used in connection with Issa to underline his status as a true prophet entrusted with the 'word' of God. To John, however, the same term, which he rendered as the Greek *logos,* involved a far more complicated idea. Some centuries earlier, the Greek Stoic philosophers had used this very term to denote immanent reason. Borrowing this usage from them, the Jewish theologian and Hellenistic philosopher Philo (called Philo Judaeus, or Philo of Alexandria, c.20 BC–c.50 BC) developed it in a special way – one which

reflects his Semitic religious background. To him, the *logos* became the Idea of Ideas, the first begotten Son of God, the image of God, and the second to God. One wonders to what extent John was familiar with the work of Philo, who was the contemporary of Jeshu and his early apostles. John did not, however, borrow the term *logos* directly from Philo's writings. The place he actually took it from was his Aramaic source, which was the Nazarene Gospel. We can assume that this was the case because John borrowed from this same source his peculiar concept of the *parakletos* (chapter 5). Having done this, John proceeded to treat the *logos* in more or less the same manner as Philo, by taking it to indicate the eternal essence of Jesus as the divine Christ. His intention, quite clearly, was to elaborate on Paul's theory of Jeshu as the eternal Christ.

According to the Nazarene Gospel, Mary, the mother of Issa, was the ward of the priest Zechariah – apparently Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the contemporary of Ezra who lived in the Arabian Jerusalem (see chapters 4 and 5). Formerly, this same Jerusalem was the capital of the Biblical kingdom of Judah. The career of Issa, as Mary's son, must have started in that same Jerusalem, or at least nearby. With the 'Jesus' who was Jeshu, it was a different matter. According to all three of the Synoptic Greek Gospels, Jeshu first embarked on his active career in Galilee, where his preaching was rejected, leaving him to bemoan that 'prophets' were never honoured in their own country and among their own folk (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24). It was not exactly then, however, but at some later time that Jeshu reportedly left Galilee to continue his preaching in Judea (Matthew 19:1; Mark 10:1; Luke 23:5). All four Gospels agree that his triumphal entry into the Palestinian Jerusalem – the event Christians celebrate as Palm Sunday - only occurred four or five days before his arrest, summary trial and execution.

On the geographical movements of Jeshu, John says something entirely different. According to his Gospel, the active career of 'Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph' (1:45) began when he decided to 'go forth' or 'go out' (Greek *exerchomai)* into Galilee (1:43), presumably from some place

'beyond the Jordan' (1:28) where John the Baptist had first recognized him as the Son of God (1:34). Had Jeshu truly come from the Galilean Nazareth in Palestine, he would have had to move from that place eastwards, across the Jordan river, to reach the territory 'beyond the Jordan'. Having arrived there, he would have had to 'come back' or 'return' rather than 'go forth' or 'out' into his native Galilee. In any case, according to John, Jeshu performed his first miracle (2:11) three days after arriving in Galilee (2:1).

Not many days later (2:12), however, Jeshu allegedly left Galilee and 'went up' (Greek *anabaino*) to Jerusalem (2:13), where his first preaching is reported. From there, he 'came', or 'went on' (Greek *erchomai*) to the province of Judea (3:22), where he began to baptize, as John the Baptist did, to the grave concern of the Baptist's disciples, and the patient forbearance of the Baptist himself (3:22-36). Then Jeshu 'departed again' (Greek *apelthe palin*) to Galilee (4:3). Along the way, he stopped in Samaria (4:443), in a city called Sychar (Greek spelling *sichar,* 4:5), where he had a long conversation with a local Samaritan woman. It is at this point that John interrupts the narrative to quote Jeshu bemoaning the fate of a prophet in his homeland (4:44; see below).

Here, the following can be observed about the movements of Jeshu after his brief stay in Galilee, as peculiarly reported in the Gospel of John:

1 Judea was the province of Roman Palestine where the local Jerusalem actually stood. If Jeshu began preaching in this Jerusalem, his preaching would have actually started in Judea. From the Palestinian Jerusalem, Jeshu could not have 'come' to Judea, but he could have conceivably 'gone out' to other parts of the province. In Greek, the verb *erchomai* used by John can indicate either movement.

2 If Jeshu 'went up' rather than simply 'went' to preach in Jerusalem, the place from which he set out must have been somewhere nearby, regardless of whether the Jerusalem in question was the Palestinian or the Arabian *Uri Shalim* (see chapter 4). The verb *anabaino* used here certainly indicates relative elevation (or, figuratively, importance) rather than appreciable distance between the points of departure and arrival.

3 If Jeshu was a native of the Palestinian Galilee, he would, as in the earlier case (see above), have 'returned again' to his home region, not 'departed again' there.

4 To go from the Palestinian Judea to the Palestinian Galilee, Jeshu would certainly have had to pass through Samaria. Some scholars have suggested that the city of Sychar, in Samaria, is the present village of 'Askar (*‘skr*), in the vicinity of modern Nablus. Had this been the case, the name of the place would have been transliterated into Greek more accurately as *Aschar,* or perhaps *Askar,* rather than *Sichar:* the voiced pharyngeal fricative, with which the name of 'Askar begins, is too important to be dropped in transliteration. Moreover the *iota* in *Sichar* does not feature as a vowel sound in *Askar*. The plain fact is that no place by the name Sychar is historically attested for the Palestinian Samaria.

5 John clearly says that what prompted Jeshu to go to Galilee was the disrespect he encountered as a prophet in an original homeland which was Judea or Samaria. In Galilee, according to John, Jeshu was well received certainly upon his 'departure again' to that territory.

In addition to these four points, there are two other matters to be noted:

First, the Greek Gospels nowhere speak of Jeshu as a mere 'prophet'; they simply indicate that he was sometimes popularly mistaken to be one (Matthew 16:14; 21:11; Mark 6:15; 8:28; Luke 7:39; 9:8, 19; John 1:21, 25; 4:19; 6:14; 7:40, 52; 9:17). Apart from one other instance mentioned only by Luke (13:33), Jeshu is only made to refer to himself as a 'prophet' where he is quoted as saying that prophets are never honoured in their own country by their own people. On the other hand, judging by the Koran (19:30), the Issa of the Nazarene Gospel, despite his special attributes, was essentially a prophet and nothing else.

Second, the Islamic scholar Bukhari, writing in the ninth century AD and quoting earlier authorities, reports that when Muhammad went to visit Waraqah Ibn Nawfal – a firm believer in the Nazarene Gospel (chapter 5) – this learned Christian priest and scholar was greatly impressed with what Muhammad told him about his revelations, and expressed a wish to live long enough to see Muhammad persecuted and

expelled from the midst of his own people. Muhammad was puzzled by these words, so Waraqah, according to Bukhari, pointed out to him that this was what normally happened to true prophets. This seems to indicate that the statement ascribed by the Greek Gospels to Jeshu about the troubles 'prophets' normally encounter among their own folk was originally attributed in Waraqah's Aramaic Gospel to Issa. John apparently knew this to be the case. While the three Synoptic Gospels quote Jeshu as making this statement on a particular occasion, John was more vague – in fact, studiedly oblique (4:43–5):

> After spending two days [in Sychar, in Samaria], Jesus left and went to Galilee. For he himself *had said,* 'A prophet is not respected in his own country.' When he arrived in Galilee, the people there welcomed him . . .

At an ealier stage of our investigation, the suggestion was made that Jeshu and his disciples may have originally come to Palestine from Arabia. This was one way of explaining why Paul, from his base in Damascus, decided to go to Arabia rather than Jerusalem immediately after his conversion (see chapter 2). This means that the Jeshu of the New Testament was possibly no less Arabian by origin than the Issa of the Nazarene Gospel. In this case, his native Galilee would not have been the Galilee (Arabic *Jalit)* of Palestine, but another Galilee in Arabia: the valley called today Wadi Jalil, in the Taif region of the Hijaz, which carries precisely the same name. The tribe inhabiting this valley are called to this day the Nasirah (spelt *nsrt*), which is exactly the name of the town of Nazareth (Arabic *Nasirah,* also *nsrt*) in the Palestinian Galilee. This could, of course, be pure coincidence; but its possible historical significance must not be excluded.

Given the frequency of historically reported migrations from Western Arabia to Palestine and other parts of Syria between the third and seventh centuries AD, it is perfectly plausible to suggest that the names of Galilee and Nazareth were introduced to northern Palestine by migrations of the same sort at some earlier time. For example, it is known that the northern parts of Galilee (today in south Lebanon) came

to be called Jabal 'Amilah (the present name) after the Arabian tribe of 'Amilah, which arrived to settle there between the fourth and sixth centuries AD. At approximately the same time, a settlement of the Arabian al-Taym tribe nearby gave its name to the present Wadi al-Taym; while another by the Arabian al-Tha'alibah tribe, a little further to the north, gave its name to the present village of Tha'labaya (Aramaic form of the Arabic *al-Tha'alibah,* meaning 'the Foxes'). Also in the same period, Arabian immigrants of the Bahra' tribe, arriving in northern Syria, gave their name to Jabal Bahra' – today the 'Alawite mountains', in the hinterland of the port of Latakia. The valley of the Beirut River is still called Wadi al-Ja'mani after a similar Arabian tribal settlement of unknown antiquity. The count, in fact, is endless. Why should the same not be true of the Galilee and Nazareth of Palestine?

New Testament scholars have often noted that the historical existence of Nazareth as a town in the Palestinian Galilee is very poorly attested for the period of Jeshu. The earliest possible mention of its name in a known archaeological record actually dates from no earlier than the third century AD. More significantly, scholars have also observed that the Gospels completely fail to mention the most important towns which did exist in the Palestinian Galilee in early Roman times: most notably, Sepphoris, in the close neighbourhood of Nazareth. Furthermore, some of the Galilean places which the Gospels do mention in connection with the early career of their Jesus have not been satisfactorily located by their names in the Palestinian Galilee. Some of these names, however, certainly exist to this day in the Hijaz, where the enigmatic Bethsaida, for example, with its construct name (Semitic *byt syd,* meaning the 'house' or 'temple' of *syd*) is perhaps the present village of Sayadah (exactly *syd*), approximately 115 kilometres south of Taif, in the same vicinity as Wadi Jalil. In two instances where Matthew (11:21) and Luke (10:13) speak of this Bethsaida, they associate it with another place called Chorazin (Semitic original *qrzn*), which has equally defied identification in the Palestinian Galilee. Not far from the possible Arabian Bethsaida, which is the Sayadah of the Hijaz, stands the village called today

Qurazimah (*qrzm*). The name of this place is exactly 'Chorazin', except that the final consonant in it is *m* rather than *n*. For those among us who are not linguists, it must be pointed out that the suffixed m or *n* in the Semitic languages normally indicate the masculine plural, and are interchangeable between one language or dialect and another.*

Of the confused geography of the Greek Gospels and the high probability that some of it was Arabian rather than Palestinian, more will be said in due course. What is important to keep in mind for the moment is that, judging by the evidence of the Synoptic Gospels, the Jesus who was actually Jeshu began his preaching career in a region called Galilee, which was reportedly his home country. John knew this to be the case; at the same time, he wanted to identify this Jeshu with the Issa of the Nazarene Gospel, who came from the Arabian Jerusalem, formerly the capital of the Biblical kingdom of Judah.

This kingdom of Judah was so called in its time after the Israelite tribe of Judah – the tribe to which its rulers belonged, who were the house of David. In Biblical Hebrew, the word for 'Jews' *(yhwdym)* derives directly from Judah *(yhwdh)* as a territorial and tribal name. In Hellenistic Palestine, the territory of Judea carried a name (Greek *loudaia)* which denoted 'the land of the Jews' (Greek *loudaioi*) rather than 'Judah' (differently attested in New Testament Greek as *Iouda:* Matthew 2:6a, 6b; Luke 1:39; Hebrews 7:14; Revelations 5:5; 7:5). Had the Old Testament Judah been the same territory as the Roman province of Judea in Palestine, there would have been no point to spelling its name in Greek in a different way.

John knew or at least suspected that the Issa of his Aramaic source was an Arabian, not a Palestinian. More certainly, he knew that Jeshu, who was an altogether different person, originally arrived in Palestine from Arabia, where his native Nazareth and Galilee were actually located. To reconcile the facts of the career of Issa with those of Jeshu,

* The essential part of the name Chorazin, or Qurazimah (*qrz*) is most probably a dialectical variant of the Aramaic *karoz,* meaning 'preacher' (from the root *krz,* 'preach'). In that case, the name of the place in either of the two possible plural forms would mean 'preachers'.

what he did in his Gospel, in the passages referred to above, was the following.

First, he turned the Arabian Judah of the Nazarene Gospel into the Palestinian Judea, simply by spelling the name of the territory *Ioudaia* rather than *Iouda.* Once this was done, the Arabian Jerusalem of Issa became automatically identified with the Jerusalem of Judea, where Jeshu, not Issa, spent the last days of his career and was crucified.

Second, by identifying his 'Jesus' as being 'of Nazareth', and the 'son of Joseph' before beginning to speak of his historical career, he established the fact that this 'Jesus' was none other than the Jeshu who came from Galilee, and not from the Jerusalem of the Arabian Judah.

Third, John did not actually say that his 'Jesus' was a native of the Arabian, not the Palestinian Galilee; but he made a discreet hint to this effect when he said that this Jesus 'went forth' or 'went out' from the land east of the Jordan river into the Palestinian Galilee. Arriving in Syria from Western Arabia, a person coming from Wadi Jalil in the Hijaz (the Arabian Galilee of the 'Nazareth' tribe) would have first arrived in Transjordan, from where he would have had to 'go forth' across the Jordan river into the Galilee of Palestine.

Fourth, John made his 'Jesus', who was Jeshu, start his preaching career in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria rather than in Galilee, as part of the attempt to consolidate the identification of his person with that of Issa, whose career actually began there.

Fifth, to reaffirm the Galilean identity of Jeshu as a fact, without indicating that his Galilee was actually an Arabian rather than Palestinian territory, John made Jeshu perform his first miracle in 'Galilee', then 'depart again' to 'Galilee' after his first preaching in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. Here, the first 'Galilee' could have been a reference to the Arabian Wadi Jalil, while the second was definitely to the Palestinian Galilee. If this was the case, then John must have deliberately left the matter ambiguous to avoid geographical specification. At the art of ambiguity, he was apparently a master.

John gives the game away at the point where he quotes Jeshu as bemoaning the fate of prophets in their homeland

before leaving Judea and Samaria for Galilee, and not the other way round. The same Jeshu could not have had two origins: his native territory could not have been Judea and Galilee at the same time. The one slip John made in his account of the early career of his composite 'Jesus' is that he affirmed for him two origins: one tacitly; the other by implication. Otherwise, the work he did in the collation of his source material was subtle to perfection.

7 From Arabia to Palestine

BEFORE going any further, it might be useful to make a summary of what we have so far learnt about the Jesus question.

Our story begins in the middle decades of the fifth century BC, when an eminent Israelite scholar called Ezra, of the priestly house of Aaron, gathered the sundry scriptures and traditions of his people and redacted them into a formal canon. Ezra at the time lived among the Israelite exiles in Babylonia. Later, when the Achaemenid rulers of Persia permitted the return of the Israelites to their native land of Judah, he led a group of them to Jesrusalem, possibly but not necessarily to settle. For the sake of the argument, let us grant that the place in question was not the Jerusalem of Palestine, but the one of Arabia: *Uri Shalim,* which is probably the present village of Al Sharim, in the Asir highlands, as I have suggested in an earlier work on the subject (see *The Bible came from Arabia).* Israelites and other followers of the monotheism of Moses who accepted the authority of Ezra – in Babylonia and Arabia as in Palestine and elsewhere - came to be known as the Jews.

Some decades later, in about 400 BC, a man called Issa began to preach a more liberal interpretation of the monotheism of Moses among the Israelites of the same Arabian Jerusalem. His mother Mary, regarded in her time as a holy woman of the temple, allegedly belonged to the priestly house of Aaron - the same Aaron from whom Ezra claimed descent. The somewhat innovative preaching of Issa was apparently opposed and rejected by the people of his home region, many of whom were already Jews. It was accepted, however, in another part of Arabia – apparently the Hijaz – where the followers of Issa came to be known as the Nazarenes (in the

Koran, the *Nasara).* This was perhaps because the first success of the man's preaching was among the inhabitants of the tribal territory of the *Nasirah,* the Arabian 'Nazareth' (see below). These Nazarenes had a special Gospel written in Aramaic whose existence in the seventh century AD – the period of the rise of Islam – is attested by authoritative Islamic traditions. These traditions further indicate that the same Gospel, in Aramaic or in translation, was known at the time in Ethiopia. Since then, this Nazarene Gospel has been lost, and its actual text remains unknown. However, what it originally said concerning the historical person and mission of Issa may be inferred from the Koran.

More than four centuries later, in about AD 30, a man called Jeshu of Nazareth, son of Joseph the Carpenter, left the region of Wadi Jalil in the Hijaz (the Arabian Galilee) and arrived in another region by the same name in Palestine (the Palestinian Galilee). To this day, the tribal inhabitants of his native Arabian Galilee continue to be known as the 'Nazareth' folk (in Arabic, the *Nasirah).* This Jeshu was recognized by his Israelite contemporaries as a descendant of David, with a legitimate claim to the historical throne of the Biblical kingdom of Judah, which had ceased to exist in Arabia since the sixth century BC. He was apparently a Nazarene, not a Jew; his early followers were certainly called Nazarenes. In Palestine, the man's political pretensions and special religious views got him into serious trouble with a large party of the local Jews, who felt threatened enough by him to demand his execution. Consequently, he was put to death on the cross shortly after he arrived with his partisans in Jerusalem.

To place the career of Jeshu in its proper historical perspective, there are some important points to keep in mind. Nearly two centuries before this Jeshu left Arabia, a Jewish kingdom had been established in central Palestine under the local priestly house of the Hasmoneans, then expanded by conquest to include Galilee in the north, and Idumea in the south. In both these conquered regions, Judaism was forcibly imposed on the local Arameo-Arab inhabitants. After the coming of the Romans, the Palestinian Jewish kingdom founded by the Hasmoneans passed under the rule of a Jew of Idumean origin called Herod the Great, who was recognized

by the Romans as a client king (37 BC–AD 4). His descendants, called the Herodians, continued to govern the outlying parts of Palestine following his death, again as Roman clients. However, the central region, called Judea (meaning 'land of the Jews'), was placed under direct Roman control. When Jeshu arrived in Galilee, the tetrarch (literally, 'chief ruler of a fourth part') of this particular region was a son of Herod the Great called Herod Antipas, while the Roman procurator (literally, 'manager') of Judea was Pontius Pilate. This information about Hellenistic and Roman Palestine can be gleaned from the two books of the Maccabees (Jewish accounts of the Hasmonean movement and its aftermath in Palestine, written in Greek, and forming part of the so-called Apocrypha of the Old Testament), and also from a number of other contemporary and near-contemporary sources – most importantly, the work of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.

For the suggestion that Jeshu originally came from Arabia, the evidence is circumstantial rather than direct. What we have to go by is mainly the confused geography of the Greek Gospels. This confusion has long been admitted by New Testament scholars, and given the unprovable explanation that some of the Gospel authors had never been to Palestine, while others did not know the country very well. In the preceding chapter it was noted that a number of places mentioned in the Greek Gospels – such as Bethsaida and Chorazin, both reportedly in 'Galilee' – cannot be located by anything resembling their respective names in Palestine, whereas places by the same names do exist in the Arabian Hijaz. The fact that Wadi Jalil still carries the name of Galilee in that area is a matter that cannot be easily dismissed, especially as the inhabitants of this Wadi Jalil are still called the Nasirah, or 'Nazareth' folk. As already observed, the villages of Sayadah and Qurazimah, in this same vicinity, recall the names of the Bethsaida and Chorazin of the Greek Gospels (see chapter 6). Are there more such Gospel place names to be spotted in the same area and its broader neighbourhood?

To facilitate matters, let us assume, for the moment, that Jeshu was not born in Palestine, but came originally from

Arabia, and more precisely from the Hijaz. There is certainly no proof to the contrary. This Jeshu, as we already know, was called in his time 'the Carpenter', or 'the son of the Carpenter' – not necessarily his occupation and the occupation of his father Joseph, but perhaps the family name. In old Semitic usage, as in modern Arabic usage, the surname of the same person can be indicated in two ways: either as a single noun, normally with the definite article (such as 'the Carpenter', in Aramaic *Nagara,* where the article is the suffixed *aleph*); or as this noun in a patronymic construct indicating descent (such as 'Son of the Carpenter', in Aramaic *Bar Nagara*).

While family names sometimes refer to ancestral occupations, like the English 'Smith' or 'Weaver', others such as the English 'Fleming' (from Flanders, in the Netherlands) often refer to places of origin – the locality the family came from, rather than the one in which it actually lives. Thus, as a possible surname of the Palestinian Jesus, Nagara or Bar Nagara need not have referred to an ancestral occupation. In the Hijaz, within ready reach of the Taif region, there are at least two existing villages called Nijar, one called Nujar, and another called Nujayrah. There is also a fifth called Najr which is historically attested for the same area, but no longer exists. The names of all five are *ngr* (identical with the written Aramaic *ngr,* vocalized as *nagar* to mean 'carpenter'). A Jeshu of the Hijaz called Nagara or Bar Nagara could have had an ancestor who was a carpenter. However, given the historical and present existence of at least five places called *ngr* in the area, it is far more likely that the ancestor who gave the surname came from one such place, after which he and his descendants came to be known.

To further underline this point, it must be noted that the only two instances in the Greek Gospels where Jeshu is called 'the Carpenter' (Mark 6:3), or the 'son of the Carpenter' (Matthew 13:55), involve direct quotations. This means that these two references were taken from some source or tradition which was ultimately an Aramaic one, subsequently translated into Greek. In any translation, the original connotation of expressions of usage – including surnames which happen to have literal meanings – can easily be missed.

Yet another point must be made in this connection. If the

surname of a Jeshu who originally came from the Hijaz was indeed the Aramaic *Bar Nagara,* and if all the original traditions about him were Aramaic ones (as was definitely the case), then the Aramaic language must have been spoken in his time not only in Palestine (which is known), but also in the Hijaz and other parts of Western Arabia. On this matter, there is ample evidence.

First, the places in Arabia – most of all in the Hijaz – which continue to carry names of clearly Aramaic structure are beyond count. This alone means that Aramaic was spoken in the region, possibly as the predominant language, before it was superseded by Arabic at some later time. Furthermore, the search for inscriptions in Arabia has yielded many which are distinctly Aramaic, and continues to yield more. Judging by the earliest inscriptions which have been discovered in the area in Arabic rather than Aramaic, the change of language in this region from Aramaic to Arabic could not, according to some scholars, have begun much earlier than the second or third century AD. To this very day, vestiges of Aramaic – not to speak of Hebrew – are to be found in some West Arabian dialects. Among them, in some areas, is the continuing use of the Aramaic *bar* instead of the Arabic *ibn* – exactly as in a construct Aramaic surname such as *Bar Nagara.*

If *Nagara* was actually a place in the Hijaz from which Jeshu - the Jesus of the Greek Gospels – as well as his father Joseph derived their surname, then Jeshu himself could not have been a resident of that place. The first person to carry the surname in the family would have been either his father Joseph or some earlier ancestor who left the locality to settle among the 'Nazareth' folk of Wadi Jalil. Sometimes, people migrate from one place to another in search of better living conditions. Often, however, what triggers the migration is some calamity which befalls the original place of residence: a natural calamity, such as prolonged drought; or one of another sort, such as civil war or foreign invasion.

One *Nagara* of the Hijaz is known to have been exposed to this second kind of calamity in the days of the father of Jeshu, or shortly before. In 24 BC, Aelius Gallus, the Roman prefect of Egypt, attempted a conquest of Arabia, and a complete record of his campaign is preserved in the work of the Greek

geographer Strabo. According to this record, the Roman forces under Gallus swept inland through the Hijaz to reach the Yemen, then returned by way of the coastal desert to a place called *Negra,* where they finally boarded their ships and returned to Egypt. This *Negra* must have been the coastal village of Nujayrah, near the present port of Umm Lajj, at some distance north-west of Mecca and Taif. The arrival of the Roman legions there must have caused considerable disruption in the locality. If Joseph, the father of Jeshu, was living in Nujayrah at the time, he would have had very good reason to abandon the place and move somewhere else, where the people among whom he settled came to call him Bar Nagara – meaning 'the son of Nujayrah'. This is speculation, but it could well have been true. Of the Arabian expedition of Aelius Gallus and its possible consequences for the career of Joseph's son Jeshu, more will be said in due course.

Returning to the matter of surnames and places of origin or residence, all four Gospels speak of two early disciples of Jeshu who were the brothers John and James, identified as 'the sons of Zebedee' (Greek spelling *Zebedaios*). In Aramaic, this expression would have probably been *Bnay Zbida,* indicating that the two brothers were either the sons of a man called Zbida, or that Zbida was their native or ancestral town or village. John speaks of these 'sons of Zebedee' without specifying their personal names (21:2); Luke only calls them 'the sons of Zebedee' on first mention (5:10); and both Luke and John say nothing more of the matter. Mark (1:20) and Matthew (4:21; 10:2; 26:37), on the other hand, thought that Zebedee was actually their father; Matthew referred to their mother as the 'wife of Zebedee' (literally, 'the mother of Zebedee's children', 2:20; 27:56 – which is still a polite way to refer to a man's wife in Arab tribal society).

Mark, however, had somehow heard that the two brothers were actually surnamed *Boanerges* (Greek transliteration of *Bnay Rgas*). Unless Mark himself knew Aramaic, which most New Testament scholars doubt, he must have been told by colleagues who knew the language that *Boanerges* literally meant 'Sons of Thunder'. This appears to have amused him, and he thought that 'Sons of Thunder' was a nickname given

them by Jeshu shortly after he came to know them (3:17). Some scholars suggest that Jeshu gave them this nickname because they were men of fiery temper (cf. Mark 9:38; Luke 9:54). According to Mark, Jeshu first caught sight of John and James as they were helping their fisherman father mend his fishing nets. On the basis of this information, it has been commonly supposed that their father was shouting instructions to them in a thunderous voice as they assisted him in his work, which is what made Jeshu jokingly call them 'Sons of Thunder' after they became his disciples.

The simpler explanation here is that the disciples John and James were actually called *Bnay Rgas,* either because their father was called Rgas rather than Zebedee, or because *Bnay Rgas* was their regular family name (in the singular, *Bar Rgas).* In Arabic, *rgas,* meaning 'thunder', is vocalized as *rajas;* but the more common Arabic word for 'thunder' is *ra'd,* which is attested all over the modern Arab world as a personal and family name. In Arabic, the name may be rendered invariably as the simple Ra'd (Thunder) or the construct Ibn Ra'd (Son of Thunder).

Since Luke and John, who were better acquainted with the Aramaic Gospel sources than Mark and Matthew, refer to the brothers John and James as the 'sons of Zebedee' only once in each case, and without indicating that their father was called Zebedee, it is possible that Zebedee was not the name of their father, but of their native town or village. Such a Zebedee (Aramaic form *Zbida,* written z*byd'*), in the Hijaz, is the present village of Zubaydah (written z*bydh),* 32 kilometres south of Taif, in the same neighbourhood where Wadi Jalil, the tribal Nasirah, Sayadah and Qurazimah are located (see chapter 6). This conjunction of no less than five place names from the Greek Gospels in the same corner of the Hijaz is very unlikely to be pure coincidence, especially when one considers that only two of these names – Galilee and Nazareth – are attested for Palestine. Moreover, several places called *Nagara,* or 'Carpenter', have existed or still exist in the Hijaz, after any of which Jeshu and his father Joseph before him could have been called Bar Nagara: in literal translation, 'Son of the Carpenter'. To put it most conservatively, the geographical indications that Jeshu originally came from Arabia, taken

alone, are considerably stronger than the ones that would make him a native of Palestine.

In the Greek Gospels, it is repeatedly stated that the disciples of Jeshu were twelve. The highly knowledgeable John speaks of these 'twelve' without ever listing their names (6:13, 67, 70, 71; 20:24). Mark gives a full list of them (3:16–19), and the same roll is reproduced with slight changes in the order of the names by Matthew (10:24). Luke does the same (6:14–16), except that he replaces one of the names cited by Mark and Matthew (Thaddeus), with another (Judas the brother of James). Roth Luke (22:30) and Matthew (18:28) speak of a promise by Jeshu to his disciples that they would one day sit alongside him on twelve thrones to judge the 'twelve tribes of Israel'. This might lead us to question the authenticity of the number of the disciples, when it corresponds to the number of the tribes of Israel as reported in the Old Testament. There is in fact a clear statement in Luke that the number of the disciples of Jeshu – certainly that of his more trusted followers – was not twelve but no less than seventy-two (10:1, 17). Again, this number, being a multiple of twelve, arouses suspicion. The translators of the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint were seventy in number according to one tradition, and seventy-two according to another. A well-known Islamic tradition relates that the Israelites, and the Christians after them, split into seventy or seventy-two sects (depending on the tradition), and Muhammad warned that Islam would have the same fate.

The Greek Gospels appear to stand on firmer ground where they mention the first four disciples to follow Jeshu. Mark (1:16, 19) and Matthew (4:18–22) speak of them as the brothers Simon (i.e. Simon Cephas, or Peter) and Andrew, and the brothers John and James (the 'sons of Zebedee'), all four being fishermen. Luke also speaks of the first followers of Jeshu as fishermen, omitting the name of Andrew among the four in the first instance (5:3–11), but subsequently naming him among the 'twelve' disciples (6:14). John omits the names of John and James, mentioning only the brothers Simon and Andrew without speaking of them as fishermen, and adding to their names those of Philip and Nathanael. A fifth man who was an early disciple of Jesus, according to Mark (2:14),

was the tax collector Levi the son of Alphaeus. Luke agrees, but only calls the man Levi (5:27–9). Where he lists the twelve disciples, he speaks of another 'son of Alphaeus' called James (6:15; cf. Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Acts 1:13). Matthew, as already observed, disagrees with Mark and Luke and calls the tax collector Matthew (4:18–22; 9:9; see chapter 3). It is striking that while Luke and John speak of the first followers of Jesus as numbering four, Mark and Matthew record five – exactly the number assigned for the disciples of Jeshu by the Jewish Talmud (see chapter 3).

Did Jeshu, at the start of his career, only have five disciples, as the Talmud says he did? Were those the ones who first arrived with him from the 'Galilee' of the Hijaz, if our assumption about his Arabian origin is correct? According to the Talmud, the five disciples of Jeshu were Mattai, Naccai, Nezer, Buni and Todah (the last, in a Talmudic variant, Taddai). Of these five names, Mattai and Todah are undoubtedly Matthew and Thaddaeus, those being the Hellenized forms of the same names. In one passage of the Talmud, Buni is attested as the Semitic name of a man called in Greek Nicodemus. According to John, there was a rich 'Galilean' Jew and Pharisee called Nicodemus (Buni?) who admired Jeshu (3:lff.); defended him against attack by other Pharisees (7:50ff.); and was one of two men who saw to it that he was given a proper burial after his crucifixion, Nicodemus himself providing the costly spices for the purpose (19:38–41). Naccai and Nezer, I would suggest, were the native Semitic names of Andrew and Philip: they were the only two disciples of Jeshu referred to in the Gospels by Greek names, with no indication (as in the case of Simon Cephas, or Peter) that they also were known by Semitic names (see chapter 1).

The Talmud, however, could have been correct in giving the number of the original disciples of Jeshu as five, and wrong in its assumption as to who these original five were. Can their identities be established with any certainty? We must examine the information the Gospels supply.

First, as already indicated, the Boanerges brothers, John and James, were 'sons of Zebedee', which may well mean that they came from the village known today as Zubaydah, in the Taif region.

Second, according to John, the brothers Simon and Andrew (1:44), and also the third disciple Philip (1:44; 12:21) came from Bethsaida, already identified with due caution as being possibly the village of Sayadah, in the same region.

Third, according to Mark and Luke, the fifth disciple of Jeshu was Levi 'son of Alphaeus' (Greek *Alphaios*). As in the case of the 'sons of Zebedee', a place called Alphaeus (Semitic *'lp,* or more likely *'lp*) could have been his native town or village. Such an Alphaeus, in the Hijaz, is the present village of 'Allaf *i'lp),* just outside Mecca, less than a hundred kilometres west-south-west of Taif. The later disciple James, as another 'son of Alpheus', could have come from this same 'Allaf.

The names of the two reportedly early disciples we are left with from the different Gospel accounts are the Matthew mentioned in Matthew, and the Nathanael mentioned in John. In Matthew, the identity of the first is clearly confused with that of Levi son of Alphaeus. We can therefore discount Matthew from the short list of early disciples. According to John, when Jeshu first caught sight of Nathanael, he said: 'Here is a real Israelite; there is nothing false in him' (1:47). If the fundamental assumptions of the historical geography of the Old Testament on which we are basing this investigation are correct, Jeshu should have had little difficulty finding a 'real Israelite' in the Hijaz, where most of the Nazarenes and Jews would have been of Israelite tribal extraction. It was different in Palestine, where the Jewish population included large numbers of Idumeans, Galileans and others whose connection with Judaism was barely two centuries old (see above), and where 'real Israelites', as distinct from other Jews who falsely claimed Israelite descent, must have been a small minority. For Jeshu to have been so obviously delighted to meet a 'real' Israelite in whom there was 'nothing false', such as Nathanael, it is far more likely that he met him in Palestine rather than in the Hijaz.

Removing both Matthew and Nathanael from our short list, we are left with Simon and Andrew, John and James, Levi and Philip. Luke, as already noted, does not mention Andrew among the first disciples of Jeshu, although he does admit that he was Simon's brother. He must have had some reason

to do so. Perhaps Andrew of Bethsaida, along with James 'son' of Alphaeus, left Arabia at a later time to join Jeshu and his five original disciples in Palestine. Assuming the validity of the textual and geographical analysis presented in this chapter, we may conclude that the five original disciples who accompanied Jeshu when he left his native Hijaz to go to Palestine were Simon and Philip of Sayadah (Bethsaida), the brothers John and James of Zubaydah (Zebedee), and Levi of 'Allaf (Alphaeus). Later, he was followed to Palestine by Andrew of Sayadah (the brother of Simon) and James of 'Allaf; also by members of his family among whom his mother and maternal aunt, and some if not all of his brothers and sisters, are distinctly mentioned in different instances (Matthew 12:46–7; Mark 3:31–2; 15:40; Luke 8:19-20; John 19:25). Judging by their surnames, two other disciples mentioned in the Gospels – Simon Zelotes and Judas Iscariot – must have been of Arabian origin. Unless the original disciples of Jeshu were more than five, these two also could have left the Hijaz to join Jeshu in Palestine at a later time. The name of Simon Zelotes (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), also known as Simon the Canaanite *(Kananites,* Matthew 10:4; *Kananiten,* Mark 3:18), has been a puzzle to scholars, because the Greek *Zelotes,* which literally means the 'zealous', has commonly been taken to refer to the 'Zealots'. In Roman Palestine, the Zealots were an organization of Jewish militants – virtually terrorists – who strongly opposed the Hellenizing policies of Herod the Great and his successors and their political subservience to Rome. It was certainly not in character for Jeshu, as he is depicted in the Gospels, to have had a 'Zealot' of this sort among his closest followers. The name *Zelotes,* however, as affirmed by Luke, need not be the Greek word for 'zealous'. It could equally be the transliteration of an original Aramaic surname such as *Zlota, Zel'ota,* or *Ze'lota* (in Greek transliteration, the pharyngeal fricative in the last two suggested names would automatically be omitted). In the Zahran region of the Hijaz, directly south of the Taif region, there is actually a village called Zu'lah after whose name a person, in Aramaic, would have been called *Ze'lota* (Greek form *Zelotes).* In the same vicinity, there is another village called Qinan. In Greek transliteration, *Kananites* can easily describe a person

or family belonging to this place. This provides the simplest explanation not only for the name of Simon Zelotes, but also for the fact that Matthew and Mark call the same person Simon the Canaanite. This Simon, apparently, came from Qinan, but his surname derived from an ancestral place which was the neighbouring Zu'lah. He was certainly not a 'Zealot'; nor was he 'the Patriot', which the GNB assumes the meaning of his surname to be.

Specialists will object to the interpretation which allows Simon two different surnames, on the grounds that there is a more plausible explanation as to why Matthew and Mark call this disciple the 'Canaanite', while Luke calls him the 'Zealot'. They maintain, quite correctly, that while the 'received texts' of Matthew and Mark speak of Simon as *Kananites,* the older and more authoritative texts call him *Kananaios.* The two terms normally would mean the same thing. It is argued, however, that K*ananaios* in this particular case is a transliteration by Matthew and Mark of the Aramaic *qan'an,* which actually means 'zealot'. This was because neither Matthew nor Mark knew Aramaic; but Luke did. So rather than merely transliterating Simon's surname, Luke went ahead and translated it as *Zelotes.*

In the available Aramaic literature, however, the term *qan'an* is only attested once and only in one of the Targums (the old Aramaic translations of the Old Testament) – not in the sense of 'zealot', but in the sense of 'jealous'. In this instance Jehovah, in one of the Ten Commandments, is described as a 'jealous God' (Exodus 20:5). Where the Jewish literature in Aramaic speaks of the 'zealots', such as those who defended Jerusalem against the Romans, it calls them *qanna'im* or *qanna'in,* and in the singular *qanna'i.* Some New Testament scholars have noticed this and have suggested that the *Kananaios* of Matthew and Mark must have originally been *Kannaois,* which was inadvertently altered to *Kananaios,* 'by assimilation to the geographical description of a Canaanite'.

Had Matthew and Mark actually spoken of this disciple as Simon *Kannaios,* this assumption about the connotation of his name would have indeed stood on firm ground. The problem with it, however, is that even according to the most

authoritative texts, Matthew and Mark call the disciple *Kananaios* (correctly understood by the redactors of the 'received text' to mean *Kananites).* Neither of them calls him *Kannaios.*

As the surname of the Judas who was allegedly the disciple who betrayed Jeshu (Matthew 10:4; 26:14, 25, 47; 27:3; Mark 3:19; 14:10, 43; Luke 6:16; 22:3, 47, 48; John 6:71; 12:4; 13:2, 26, 29; 18:2, 3, 5), Iscariot (Greek *Iskariotes)* has also presented problems to scholars. Various explanations of this strange surname have been attempted, but the controversy about its actual meaning continues. On very poor evidence, some have gone so far as to suggest that the name means the man with the 'dagger', or the one with the 'apron' – because John (13:29) speaks of Judas Iscariot as the disciple who carried the 'bag' for the rest of the company, which perhaps he kept in the pocket of his 'leather apron' (Greek *skortea),* hence the Greek *Iskariotes.* The etymology here, as in all other attempted explanations, is untenable on more than one ground, let alone the fact that John says nothing about Judas wearing a *skortea* which had the appropriate pocket in it. As the transliteration of a Semitic original, the Greek *Iskariotes* would point to a place called *'Askar* or *'Askar,* and a village with the name of Askar does exist to this day in the same Taif region of the Hijaz – the same region where the Galilee (Wadi Jalil), Nazareth (Nasirah), Bethsaida (Sayadah), Chorazin (Qurazimah) and Zebedee (Zubaydah) of the Greek Gospels are still found. Rather than being the 'dagger man' or the 'apron man', Judas Iscariot must have simply carried the name of this 'Askar because it was his native or ancestral home.

We have been extremely cautious in investigating the possibility that Jeshu – the Jesus of the Greek Gospels – came originally from the Hijaz. We now proceed with more confidence.

8 The Messiah

We can identify the Jesus of the Greek Gospels by name and surname: he was called Jeshu Bar Nagara (regardless of whether *Nagara* was the Aramaic word for 'Carpenter', or the name of a place). We know also that he was an Israelite of the tribe of Judah. It does not follow that he was a Jew, and indeed there is evidence to suggest that he actually belonged to another Israelite religious sect, the Nazarenes. They, apparently, were the followers of a post-exilic Israelite prophet called Issa whose teachings were in conflict with those of Ezra, the founder of post-exilic Judaism. According to John (8:48), the Jews mistook Bar Nagara for a 'Samaritan' – the follower of yet another Israelite sect which rejected the authority of Ezra.

In his time, Bar Nagara was recognized as a descendant of David, with a rightful claim to the historical Israelite throne. We also have good reason to believe that he was born and raised in the Hijaz. At some point, however, he took the momentous decision to go to Palestine, got into serious trouble, and was put to death on the cross. In Palestine, the man came to be known as Jeshu of Nazareth – apparently not after the town of the Palestinian Galilee *(al-Jalil)* known historically as al-Nasirah, but after the Arabian tribal territory of the Nasirah around Wadi Jalil, in the Taif region of the Hijaz. Why did Bar Nagara leave his native Arabian Galilee to undertake the disastrous venture in Palestine which ended with his execution?

Sometimes, what cannot be directly understood from evidence can be inferred by analogy: in the present instance, the search for a historical parallel. Jeshu Bar Nagara was a man with recognized dynastic pretensions to a historical throne: in his case, pretensions based on a particular Israelite

notion of legitimacy involving descent from David in the male line. Such a person might have left his native Hijaz to pursue his political fortunes in Palestine because he had reason to believe that his chances of success there were better than at home. Have there been similar situations in the long history of the Near East with which his venture can be compared?

A number of interesting parallels to the career of Bar Nagara can certainly be discovered in the history of the area during Islamic times. Starting from the seventh century AD, several descendants of Muhammad – members of the *Al al-Bayt,* or the house of the Prophet – made unsuccessful dynastic bids for his succession: not in his unique religious capacity as the Prophet, but in his other, political capacity as the founder and original head of the *Umma* – the universal political community or state of Islam.

When Muhammad died in the Hijaz in AD 632, he was survived by one daughter called Fatima. She was married to his first cousin Ali and had two sons, Hasan and Husayn: they were the only male descendants of the Prophet in their generation. These two men became the ancestors of the two branches of the house of the Prophet – the Hasanid and the Husaynid – the members of both branches being revered as Sharifs or Sayyids (chapter 1). From the very start, there were Islamic legitimists (if we may so describe them) – the Shiite sects – who believed that the sovereign institution of the caliphate, representing the political 'succession' to the Prophet, must be reserved for Sharifs or Sayyids of one line or another. Historically, however, the caliphate came to be held by other dynasties: the Umayyads of Damascus (661–750), followed by the Abbasids of Baghdad (750–1258). To the Shiites, these were two lines of usurpers. When a third line of caliphs claiming descent from the Prophet – the self-styled Fatimids established themselves as rivals to the Abbasids, first in North Africa (909–73), then in Egypt (973–1171), only a minority sect of the Shiite Muslims (the Ismailis) were prepared to recognize their legitimacy.

Meanwhile, starting from the days of the Umayyads, various Sharifs and Sayyids rose to reclaim the caliphate for the Prophet's family. The first was his grandson Husayn who, in 680, left the Hijaz to assert his hereditary right to the

caliphate in Iraq, where he had strong popular support. The forces of the Umayyad caliphs stopped him before he could cross the Euphrates river and killed him in battle. Husayn's example was followed in 740 by a grandson of his called Zayd, who also left the Hijaz to fight for the caliphate in Iraq, only to be killed. Later, under the Abbasids, yet another member of the house of the Prophet, called Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah (literally, 'Muhammad the Pure Soul'), proclaimed himself as the true caliph in the Hijaz. In 762, the Abbasids sent an army to put down his revolt, and he was captured and put to death.

Of the many other legitimist movements in the history of Islam, the one that compares most favourably with our proposed story of Bar Nagara – not at the level of morality, but only in connection with the geography and general political setting – occurred in the early eleventh century. It involved Sharif Abul-Futuh, the emir of Mecca. As a recognized descendant of the Prophet, Sharif Abul-Futuh was entrusted by the caliphs (in his case, the Fatimids of Egypt) with the hereditary government of Mecca and the guardianship of the Kaaba – the ancient sanctuary to which Muslims from all over the world were enjoined by their faith to make pilgrimage, if possible, at least once in a lifetime. By the time of Abul-Futuh, centuries of Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca had resulted in the accumulation of a considerable treasure in the Kaaba, and made the Sharifs of the city personally rich.

Since their arrival in Egypt in the late tenth century, the Fatimid caliphs had managed to extend their rule from Cairo over Palestine and other parts of Syria, but their control of their Syrian domain was not fully effective. In different parts, different chiefs wielded the real power, those of Palestine being of the local Bedouin family called the Banu al-Jarrah, whose relations with the Fatimids in Egypt were particularly strained. In 1012, a prominent courtier of the Fatimids, having fallen afoul of the reigning caliph, arrived in Palestine and began to incite the Banu al-Jarrah to proclaim their independence from Egypt. One way for them to do this, yet maintain an Islamic legitimacy for their local rule, was to declare their allegiance to the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad. But the Banu al-Jarrah considered the Abbasids no less

hostile towards them than the Fatimids, and were therefore unwilling to give them allegiance. As a way out, their Egyptian adviser suggested that these Bedouin chiefs invite the Sharif Abul-Futuh to leave Mecca and come to Palestine, to be established there under their direct control as the one and only 'rightful' caliph. When the Sharif was invited to do so, he pleaded lack of funds, but the Egyptian craftily indicated to him that there was enough treasure in the Kaaba of Mecca to finance the venture.

With the funds raised from the sale of the Kaaba treasure, Abul-Futuh left the Hijaz and arrived in Palestine, where he received a triumphal welcome and was immediately installed as caliph. Alarmed by this move, the Fatimids of Egypt hastened to pacify the Banu al-Jarrah with large payments of money and promises of full recognition of their local political prerogatives. The Palestinian chiefs, satisfied by this settlement, proceeded to inform their Egyptian adviser – the discredited Fatimid courtier – that he was no longer welcome in Palestine. At the same time, they advised Abul-Futuh to abandon his short-lived caliphate and return to the Hijaz. The Sharif prudently agreed to the suggestion and was given a cavalry escort to accompany him on his return home - poorer than he was before the venture, but politically wiser. Had he insisted on remaining in Palestine as caliph, he would doubtlessly have met the fate of other political pretenders who challenged Fatimid sovereignty in Syria. One, a certain Allaqa, who in 999 proclaimed himself sovereign emir in the city of Tyre, was captured in battle and flayed alive, and his skin, stuffed with straw, was paraded as an example to others.

In the annals of Islam, Husayn, Zayd and Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah, who died in the determined pursuit of their legitimist claims, are unanimously regarded as heroes. The Shiite Muslims go further and regard the more notable among them them as Christ-like figures worthy of special veneration. To this day, the anniversary of the violent death of Husayn in 680 continues to be celebrated as the most important day in the Shiite calendar. By contrast, the venture of Abul-Futuh, who was lured to claim the caliphate by the cynical politics of his time, only to opt for safety at the first

sign of danger, is treated by Islamic historians as a joke.

With respect to its lasting significance to his followers, the career of Jeshu Bar Nagara in the first century of our era was not much different from those of Husayn, Zayd and al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in the seventh and the eighth. He was as convinced of the Tightness of his cause as they were, and met the same tragic fate, thereby earning the same kind of posthumous glory in his own time as they did in theirs. But to speak of Bar Nagara and Abul-Futuh in the same breath would be plain sacrilege: a comparison of the sublime with the ridiculous. In some essential respects, however, the adventure of Abul-Futuh does provide a good working model for the reconstruction of the story of Bar Nagara: first, because it started in the Hijaz and culminated in Palestine; second, because one can tell exactly how it was connected with the vagaries of the regional politics of his time; third, because it involved a waste of funds. That Abul-Futuh is dead and forgotten, while Bar Nagara remains the living Christ to countless multitudes, is an entirely different matter, and must not prejudice the case for the purpose of historical comparison.

Keeping the Abul-Futuh model in mind, we can now examine the details of the story of Jeshu Bar Nagara – the 'Jesus' of the New Testament. To extricate his particular story from the Gospel narratives, which combine stories of more than one 'Jesus', we must remember that the one who was Jeshu Bar Nagara was an Israelite of royal descent with a claim to the throne of David. By labelling him accordingly as we read through the four Gospels, we can spot him wherever he appears and call him by his real name. For example, wherever the Gospels speak of 'Jesus' as the Son of David, or indicate a concern on his part with anything pertaining to 'Israel' or the 'Israelites', the man in question will be the Bar Nagara we are in search of.

Another matter to be kept in mind here relates to the question of Israelite as distinct from Jewish kingship. Historically, no less than four dynasties of Jewish kings have existed at different times in different places: the Hasmoneans, followed by the Herodians, in Hellenistic and Roman Palestine; the Dhu Yazan dynasty, who were the Jewish rulers of

the South Arabian kingdom of Himyar (the modern Yemen) at least during the sixth century AD; finally, the kings of the Jewish Khazars, who were Turks by race and language, and whose kingdom between the sixth and tenth centuries AD centred around the part of the Volga basin bordering the Caspian Sea. All these were Jewish rather than Israelite royal dynasties, in the sense that their claim to rule was based on the actual possession of power, not on descent from King David. Surprisingly, the only kings of historical times who did claim descent from David were Christians, not Jews: the so-called 'neguses' of Ethiopia who, until the present century, continued to style themselves officially as the 'Lions of Judah'. One wonders here: is it possible that the original, Nazarene neguses of Ethiopia (see chapter 5) were an Israelite dynasty with a recognized claim of descent from David?*

In Palestine, the Jewish kings of the Hasmonean dynasty first established their rule as high priests; they may well have been accepted in their time as Israelites, but not of the one legitimate royal line. Their Herodian successors, however, could not even make this modest claim. They were generally known to be Idumeans from southern Palestine of no Israelite lineage, and even as Jews they were only recent converts. To these Herodians, if not also to the Hasmoneans before them, the appearance on their territory of a man popularly acclaimed as a descendant of David must have posed a serious threat, no matter the number of people involved.

In the days of Herod Antipas, Jeshu Bar Nagara was such a man. In 24 BC, two or three decades before he was born, the

* Historically, successive dynasties of Ethiopian kings have claimed direct descent from a legendary marital union between David's son Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Interestingly, the Ethiopian church, which maintains Israelite practices such as circumcision and the ritual veneration of the Ark of the Covenant, has historically undertaken to ensure that the ruling dynasty of the country was always of proper Davidic lineage. When the Zagwe dynasty, which seized the Ethiopian throne between the tenth and eleventh centuries, was finally overthrown in the late thirteenth, the ecclesiastical argument to justify their overthrow was that they were not of pure Solomonic blood.

Roman legions of Aelius Gallus had invaded Arabia as far south as the Yemen, passing through his native Hijaz not only in their advance, but also in their retreat (chapter 7), A lesser disruption of day-to-day life in the region would have been enough to trigger off a fresh wave of migration from Western Arabia in the direction of Palestine, as normally happened in such situations. On one earlier occasion, Arabian immigrants from the part of the Hijaz called Wadi Jalil had apparently settled in northern Palestine, giving the name of their original homeland to a new 'Galilee' in that locality. After the Roman invasion of Arabia, more immigrants from the same Wadi Jalil – among them members of the local Nasirah, or 'Nazareth' tribe – must have arrived to establish themselves among the earlier immigrants in the same area, the new Nasirah immigrants ultimately giving their name to the 'Nazareth' where they settled.

When Jeshu Bar Nagara was born in the Hijaz, this movement of population from his native land to Palestine was still going on, with individuals moving back and forth between the two territories carrying news and maintaining links between the immigrants and their relatives in the home country. Growing up in the Hijaz then, the young Bar Nagara was in a position to be well informed not only of the immigrant kinsfolk in Palestine, but also of the social and political conditions prevailing there.

In Palestine, he learnt, the Romans had established their direct rule over Judea, while different members of the house of Herod governed other parts. Since the death of King Herod the Great in 4 BC, the Romans had denied these princelings the royal title. Instead, they recognized them as tetrarchs, or 'governors of fourth parts'. In Galilee, the ruling tetrarch was Herod Antipas, who was generally unpopular with the Israelites among his subjects. Whatever support he had came from local Jews who were not Israelite by origin, or who were not very concerned about the question of Israelite dynastic legitimacy. The Romans, moreover, seemed to have an interest in keeping the tetrarch in an insecure position, the better to control him, by secretly encouraging his political and religious opponents to foment troubles against him. On his very territory, a popular preacher called John the Baptist

lost no opportunity to denounce the personal behaviour of the tetrarch and his family and the loose morals of his court as glaring examples of the evils of the time.

The Israelite and non-Israelite Jews of Palestine, so the intelligence went, were not of one heart and mind. The so-called Herodians among them willingly accommodated themselves to the prevailing Hellenistic culture in the country, which imposed the Greek language and Greek manners and morals on the traditional folk ways. But there were Zealots who rejected the invading culture by religious principle, fiercely opposing the Roman rule that stood behind it. The priestly class of the Sadducees, in Jerusalem as elsewhere, quarrelled endlessly with the rabbis of the Pharisee sect. The Sadducees strictly upheld the original Israelite monotheism of Moses; the Pharisees, in the tradition of Ezra, gave this same monotheism a broader interpretation which took into account the scriptural contributions of all the Biblical prophets, as well as the so-called 'Oral Torah', which was subsequently to provide the basic material for the Talmud. More important, there were Israelites of different sects in the country who were unhappy with the plight of their race and yearned for the promised coming of the Messiah, or Christ: the Son of David, who would restore to them their lost dignity as a people by re-establishing the historical Israelite kingdom.

Pondering this information in the Hijaz, as he received it from travellers returning from Judea or the Palestinian Galilee, Jeshu Bar Nagara saw his opportunity to act. After all, he was an Israelite prince of the royal line; no one could deny this. In the Hijaz, he was wasting his time, much as his local predecessors of the house of David had done. If he did have a special political destiny as a true prince of Israel, such a destiny could only be fulfilled in Palestine. His family, initially, tantalized by the prospect of dynastic success, may have pressed him to 'go to Judea'. This may explain the only passage in the Gospels where the brothers of Jeshu are actually made to speak. Removed from the somewhat awkward context in which they are placed in the Gospel of John, and following the word-to-word translation of the Revised Standard Version, their words to him were (John 7:3–4):

> 'Leave here* and go to Judea . . . no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly . . . show yourself to the world.'

Leaving the Hijaz with a few trusted followers, Bar Nagara had to cross the Jordan valley to reach Galilee, where he could count on the new immigrants from his native Wadi Jalil for initial support. The first contact he made at the Jordan river was with John the Baptist: a local Israelite religious figure with many followers, whose goodwill Bar Nagara was determined to secure as a political asset for his mission. Surmising who the man actually was, or having received prior information about his special identity and standing, as is more likely, John was reluctant to baptize him. But Bar Nagara insisted and John finally obliged (Matthew 3:14–15):

> John tried to make him change his mind. 'I ought to be baptized by you,' John said, 'and yet you have come to me!' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires.' So John agreed.

That there were people in Palestine who recognized Jeshu Bar Nagara as an Israelite prince of the royal line upon his first arrival in the country is also attested by the story of his first meeting with the disciple Nathanael (John 1:45–9):

> Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one whom Moses wrote about in the book of the Law and whom the prophets also wrote about. He is Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth.' 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' Nathanael asked. 'Come and see,' answered Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, he said about him, 'Here is a real Israelite; there is nothing false in him!'. . . 'Teacher,' answered Nathanael, 'You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

* John says that the brothers of Jeshu addressed these words to him in Galilee - presumably the one in Palestine. But the place is not mentioned in the actual quotation. In any case, Galilee under Herod Antipas was as much at the centre of the Jewish 'world' of Palestine (see the rest of the passage) as the Roman procuratorship of Judea was. Certainly, it was more so politically, because of the autonomy it enjoyed.

According to Paul, Jeshu Bar Nagara – the 'human' Jesus – was not only a descendant of David; he was also a 'rich' man who 'gave up all he had' and 'made himself poor 'by his own free will' in pursuit of his Messianic mission (2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:5). Certainly, the mission of Bar Nagara in Palestine was more political than religious, and the pursuit of politics is normally expensive. Travelling from the Hijaz to Palestine with a band of disciples, then continually moving from place to place in Galilee and Judea with a growing number of relatives and dependants was alone a costly undertaking needing adequate funding. Judging by the Gospel evidence, these funds were clearly available, kept and managed for the travelling company, certainly towards the end, by Judas Iscariot who carried the 'bag' – the same 'bag' from which the expenses of the Last Supper were reportedly disbursed (John 13:29). Where did these funds come from?

Considering that the Gospels never mention the father of Jeshu as being present anywhere during the active years of his son's career, one might assume that Joseph Bar Nagara died in the Hijaz before his son decided to leave for Palestine. To finance his mission there, Jeshu may have 'made himself poor of his own free will' by liquidating the family property before his departure, in the same manner as Abul-Futuh in AD 1012 sold the Meccan treasure for a similar purpose. This must have left not only Jeshu, but also his widowed mother and orphaned brothers and sisters impoverished. Since the Gospels do not speak of him or of any of his six or more brothers and sisters as having wives or husbands, all of them would seem to have been young enough not to be married. Their society traditionally frowned on wilful male celibacy, and also preferred marriage for women unless there was no man willing to propose it. Taking this into consideration, it seems unlikely that Jeshu was a confirmed bachelor in the thirtieth year of his life, when he is supposed to have started his Palestinian mission. To have been still unmarried, which appears to be the fact, his age when he decided to leave the Hijaz would probably have been much younger than thirty. Actually, only Luke among the Gospels says that Jeshu was thirty years old when he started his preaching (3:23), and we have already questioned this matter because of the parallel it

pleads for with the age at which two figures of the Old Testament (Joseph and David) reportedly embarked on their careers (see chapter 3).

In any case, the family of Jeshu Bar Nagara were unhappy with his decision to go to Palestine alone, leaving them virtually destitute in the Hijaz, and they soon followed him. Evidently, this was not what he had instructed them to do. The first time the Gospels mention a meeting between them and Jeshu, it is to record the chilly reception he gave them: they were left standing 'outside' (Greek *exo),* waiting for him to finish a public address before they could 'see' him and 'speak' to him. When someone interrupted his address to inform him of their presence, Jeshu replied with the comment that his real 'mother', 'brothers' and 'sisters' were not those of his blood who were waiting for him 'outside', but his true and faithful followers (Matthew 12:47–50; Mark 3:31–5; Luke 8:19–21).

Wherever he went in Palestine, Jeshu made great issue of being the promised Messiah descended from David. Perhaps he preached nothing else. Were the beautiful teachings which the Gospels attribute to him his own? Were they those of a less political Jesus: perhaps the Issa of the Nazarene Gospel, or even some other figure whose identity remains to be discovered? Or did they derive, as some suggest, from a forgotten anthology of aphorisms and pithy sayings which were part of the traditional Aramaic folk culture of the period? 'Actually, Jesus himself did not baptize anyone; only his disciples did.' This statement, which interrupts the narrative of the Gospel of John at one point (4:2), suggests that Jeshu was not much concerned with making religious conversions. Of Jeshu's own political preaching in which he offers himself as the promised Messiah, and of the different ways this preaching was received, the following is a good example (Luke 4:16–22):

> on the Sabbath he went as usual to the synagogue. He stood up to read the Scriptures and was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent

> me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.' Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. All the people in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him, as he said to them, 'This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.' They were all well impressed with him and marvelled at the eloquent words that he spoke.

When he elaborated his point, comparing himself to the most revered of the miracle-working piophets of the Jewish scriptures, Elijah and Elisha, the reaction to his preaching changed (Luke 4:28–30):

> When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were filled with anger. They rose up, dragged Jesus out of the town, and took him to the top of the hill on which their town was built. They meant to throw him over the cliff, but he walked through the middle of the crowd and went his way.

For someone setting out to attract a following among ordinary folk, youthful charm and fiery eloquence, coupled with princely descent, make an excellent combination. In addition to this, Jeshu Bar Nagara was thoroughly versed in the Israelite scriptures, readily quoting appropriate passages from them to promote his cause whenever the need arose. Common people were impressed by the facility with which he did this, but the priests and the learned, the Sadducees and Pharisees, were not. From the very beginning, these men tried to discredit his mission by testing him with hard questions in the presence of his followers and admirers, or by making negative remarks about his public and private behaviour behind his back. Invariably, however, Bar Nagara was ready with a devastating riposte. Here is one well-known example (Mark 12:13–27, also repeated by Matthew and Luke):

> Some Pharisees and some members of Herod's party were sent to Jesus to trap him with questions. They came to him and said, 'Teacher, we know that you tell the truth, without

> worrying about what people think. You pay no attention to a man's status, but teach the truth about God's will for man. Tell us, is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor? Should we pay them or not?' But Jesus saw through their trick and answered, 'Why are you trying to trap me? Bring me a silver coin, and let me see it.' They brought him one, and he asked, 'Whose face and name are these?' 'The Emperor's,' they answered. So Jesus said, 'Well, then, pay the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay God what belongs to God.'

On another occasion, when told that his youthful frivolities and the sort of boon companions he kept were raising eyebrows, he responded with the kind of cavalier nonchalance that would disarm all but the most confirmed of hypocrites (Luke 7:31–4, also told by Matthew):

> Now, to what can I compare the people of this day? What are they like? They are like children sitting in a market-place. One group shouts to the other, 'We played wedding music for you, but you wouldn't dance! We sang funeral songs, but you wouldn't cry!' John the Baptist came, and he fasted and drank no wine, and you said, 'He has a demon in him!' The Son of Man* came, and he ate and drank, and you said, 'Look at this man! He is a glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax collectors and other outcasts!'

* In the Gospels, Jeshu frequently refers to himself as the 'Son of Man' (Aramaic *bar enasha;* in attested pronunciation *bar nasha).* This could have been a title of sovereignty referring to the promised Davidic Messiah as the final judge of mankind, according to a special esoteric interpretation of Daniel 7:13 (for the book of Daniel as a source of other esoteric notions related to the origins of Christianity, see chapter 10). In the book of Ezekiel, however, the oracles are directed to the prophet as 'son of man' (Hebrew *ben adam),* meaning simply 'man' in rhetorical address; and it is possible that Jeshu was in the habit of speaking of himself rhetorically in the same manner – a common form of reference by a man to himself in Arabic usage. On the other hand, one cannot rule out the possibility that the term as used in the Greek Gospels *(huios tou anthropou)* derives from a misreading of an original *bar nasi',* meaning 'son of the prince', considering that Jeshu was a Davidic *nasi',* as was his father before him. Before the script in which the Israelites wrote Hebrew as well as Aramaic began to distinguish between the letters s and *sh* by the use of diacritical marks, one could easily get confused between the terms *bar nasi'* and *bar enasha,* if the latter term was written *bar nasha,* as actually pronounced.

Encouraged by the success he first met with among the populace, Jeshu Bar Nagara threw all caution to the wind and became increasingly intrepid, heedless of the concern his itinerant mission was arousing among people in political or religious circles. The concept he had of himself as the Israelite Messiah became more and more militant – in fact, openly revolutionary (Matthew 10:34–6; also in Luke):

> Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I came to set sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law; a man's worst enemies will be the members of his own family.

The changing tone of his political platform apart, the young Bar Nagara flouted religious convention without giving much thought to the negative reactions such behaviour could elicit. He apparently considered it his special privilege to do so as a prince of the blood, to whom the law did not apply as it applied to others. For example, he took liberties with the Sabbath which the law of Moses, as strictly prescribed in the Israelite scriptures, did not permit.

On that special day of the week, Jews and other Israelite sects, including the Nazarenes, went to pray in the synagogues: often, apparently, in the same ones (different sects of Islam often pray in the same mosques to this day). The law of Moses, however, did not only set the Sabbath apart from the rest of the week as a day for community prayer; it was also supposed to be a day of complete rest, when nothing that could be considered to be work could be done. Even the preparation of family meals, the setting of tables and the lighting of the house lamps and fires had to be done for the Sabbath on the day before.

On this matter, as on others, the Nazarene interpretation of the law could have been more relaxed than the orthodox (see chapter 4). Bar Nagara's disregard of the stricter rules governing the observance of the Sabbath were perhaps in keeping with such a Nazarene interpretation; but this was not the explanation he gave for his unconventional behaviour. When the Pharisees pointed out to him on different occasions

that he and his disciples were not keeping the Sabbath as they should, his answers varied. In one instance reported by the three Synoptic Gospels, he responded quite plainly that it was his special privilege to disregard the stricter aspects of the law when there was good reason to do so, exactly as his royal ancestor David had done in his time; and that priests in the Temple actually break the rules of the Sabbath by special dispensation (Matthew 12:34, referring in the first case to 1 Samuel 21:1–6, and in the second to Leviticus 24:9 and Numbers 28:9–10). Finally, with an added hint that his own status as a Messiah of the line of David was 'something greater than the Temple' (Matthew 12:6), he haughtily dismissed the whole question by declaring that 'The Sabbath was made for the good of man; man was not made for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27–8).

Before long, however, the first signs of danger began to appear. Jeshu Bar Nagara was not only making a social nuisance of himself as a flouter of convention; he was also preaching a legitimist Israelite political platform which was attracting considerable support, and spelt trouble for Herod Antipas as governor of Galilee. John the Baptist's criticism of Herod Antipas on ethical grounds was embarrassing enough. Bar Nagara was doing something far more serious. While he carefully avoided open criticism of people in power, and even recommended due obedience to them, the very fact that he was successfully persuading people to accept him as a Messiah in the line of David posed a political challenge to the tetrarch, if not a direct threat. Herod Antipas was enough of a Jew to know what the term Messiah signified. Literally, it meant the 'Anointed' of God; historically, it was the pre-eminent title of the legitimate kings of Israel. David, in his own time, was such a Messiah. By advancing his own cause as a Messiah, Jeshu Bar Nagara, clearly, was claiming nothing less than an inalienable right to David's throne.

Bar Nagara had no cause to fear the Romans. They remained strangely silent about the public denunciations of Herod Antipas by John the Baptist; perhaps they even took a secret delight in watching their pretentious client squirm under the Baptist's verbal lashings. And they left Bar Nagara

undisturbed. His political preaching was making the tetrarch feel increasingly insecure, and therefore likely to be more compliant to Roman overlordship, which was exactly what they wanted. Bar Nagara was, if anything, far more useful than dangerous to the Romans. His political pretensions could hardly have given them any reason to worry, considering that he lacked the military means to implement them. What did give them cause for concern was the opposition they met with among Jewish and Israelite extremists – most of all the militant Galilean Zealots who never missed an opportunity to practise terror. Jeshu Bar Nagara strongly disapproved of these Zealots, publicly condemning them at least on one occasion as 'sinners' who deserved to be annihilated (see chapter 3). His words would probably have been reported to Pontius Pilate and his Roman staff on the occasion, no doubt to their satisfaction.

With Herod Antipas, it was a different matter. Losing patience with John the Baptist, Herod finally had him seized and imprisoned, then decapitated. The news of the execution was immediately brought to Bar Nagara and made him realize – perhaps for the first time – that his own life was possibly in danger. His immediate reaction was to take his disciples and go into hiding (Matthew 14:13). But he had already become such a public figure that he was followed by crowds of people wherever he went, and could not keep his movements secret. Meanwhile, Herod made pressing inquiries about him. According to one report, the tetrarch repeatedly tried to 'see' him (Luke 9:9), perhaps to convince him to abandon his Palestinian mission and return to his native Arabia in peace. But Bar Nagara continued to flee from Herod, until one day some 'Pharisees' arrived to warn him that the tetrarch had decided to kill him (Luke 13:31). To Jeshu Bar Nagara, this was the beginning of the end (Luke 13:32–4):

> Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell that fox: "I am driving out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I shall finish my work." Yet I must be on my way today, tomorrow, and the next day; it is not right for a prophet to be killed anywhere except in Jerusalem. Jerusalem,

> Jerusalem!. . . How many times have I wanted to put my arms round all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!'

Increasingly opposed by powerful Jewish enemies, and with his very life now demanded by Herod, Jeshu Bar Nagara was still determined to pursue his mission as a Son of David. By now, however, his concept of himself as the promised Israelite Messiah was beginning to change. If a Messiah failed to become a king, he had either to forfeit his credibility by fleeing for personal safety, or else he had to die. Bar Nagara chose the latter course. His whole concept of the rightful kingdom of the Messiah was now geared in that direction (John 18:36):

> My kingdom does not belong to this world; if my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. No, my kingdom does not belong here!

For Jeshu Bar Nagara, there was still one more chance to take: to go to Jerusalem, where he knew the Romans, at least, would not oppose him. Whatever remained of the money that he had originally brought with him from the Hijaz was used to arrange a proper ceremonial arrival in the holy city. According to the Old Testament prophet Zechariah (9:9), the promised Messiah was to enter Jerusalem in his time riding on an ass. This was what Bar Nagara decided to do (Matthew 17:2; Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30; John 12:14). In the city, his followers, notified of his arrival, arranged for him a triumphal welcome, with loyal crowds to hail him as the 'Son of David' (Matthew 21:9, 15; Mark 11:10), waving branches of palm trees and shouting: 'Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the King of Israel!' (John 12:13).

Upon entering Jerusalem, Bar Nagara led his party directly to the Temple, speaking of it as 'my Father's house' (John 2:16). Denouncing the misuse of the outer precincts of the sanctuary as a common market-place, he accused the authorities in charge of having turned it into a 'hideout for thieves' (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46); then 'he made a whin from cords' (John 2:15) and drove evervbodv out.

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Pilate was fully aware that the Jewish hostility to Bar Nagara – certainly among the Herodian party – was more political than religious. After all, the young man considered himself the rightful king of Israel, which Pilate understood to mean king of the Jews (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33). According to one report (Luke 23:6-12), Herod Antipas himself happened to be in Jerusalem at the time – perhaps for the Passover – and Pilate had Bar Nagara sent to him for questioning. 'On that very day', says this report, 'Herod and Pilate became friends; before this they had been enemies.'

Still convinced that Bar Nagara was innocent, Pilate made repeated pleas to the Jews who pressed for his execution to spare his life; but they refused. Moreover, there were the many high-ranking and influential enemies of Bar Nagara – the Sadducees and Pharisees as well as the Herodians – to be pacified, no less than the crowd. Declaring himself innocent of the man's blood (Matthew 27:24), Pilate finally agreed to Bar Nagara's execution. On the cross ordered for the purpose, the procurator had a notice placed which read in Aramaic, Latin and Greek: 'Jeshu of Nazareth, the King of the Jews' (John 19:20; cf. Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38). According to John (19:21–2), there was an argument between the Jews and Pilate over the wording of this notice:

> The chief priests said to Pilate, 'Do not write "The King of the Jews," but rather, 'This man said, I am the King of the Jews."' Pilate answered, 'What I have written stays written.'

Having agreed, under Jewish pressure, to have Jeshu crucified, Pilate apparently decided to make capital of the execution by presenting it to Herod Antipas as a political concession, to seal the improved relations between them. Herod wanted Jeshu killed because he was widely accepted as having a legitimate claim to be king of Israel – a claim which questioned the tetrarch's right to Jewish rule at a fundamental level. The religious authorities and their followers in Jerusalem wanted Jeshu killed as a false pretender and trouble-maker convicted of blasphemy. By agreeing to have the man put to death while remaining convinced of his

innocence, Pilate had done enough to win favour with the Jews and their priests. On the other hand, by having him crucified as a man who had a legitimate royal claim, he could publicly demonstrate goodwill towards Herod. This explains the otherwise inexplicable behaviour of Pilate on the occasion as reported in the Gospels (Matthew 27:20–31; cf. Mark 15:16–20; John 19:2–3):

> The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask Pilate to . . have Jesus put to death . . . 'What, then, shall I do with Jesus called the Messiah?' Pilate asked them. 'Crucify him!' they all answered. But Pilate asked, 'What crime has he committed?' Then they started shouting at the top of their voices: 'Crucify him!' When Pilate saw that it was no use to go on, but that a riot might break out, he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, 'I am not responsible for the death of this man! This is your doing!' . . . Then Pilate's soldiers took Jesus into the governor's palace, and the whole company gathered round him. They stripped off his clothes and put a scarlet robe on him. Then they made a crown out of thorny branches and placed it on his head, and put a stick in his right hand; then they knelt before him and mocked him. 'Long live the King of the Jews!' they said. They spat on him, and took the stick and hit him over the head. When they had finished mocking him, they took the robe off and put his own clothes back on him.

If Pilate was as convinced of Jeshu's innocence as all four Gospels insist, why did he permit him to be so insulted and tortured before his execution, unless he had some special reason to do so? More than that, why was he given the treatment of a failed political pretender to a royal crown, when the original charge on which he was questioned and convicted by the Jewish high priests was religious blasphemy?

Whatever the case, one thing is certain: on that same day, far away from his native land of the Hijaz, the young prince, whom people had hailed king of Israel as he entered Jerusalem barely a week before, was taken to a place outside the city and put to death on the cross. Was this the end? Do stories of this kind ever accept an end?

9 Dynasty of the Cross

In the last stage of our inquiry, we tried to reconstruct the story of Jeshu Bar Nagara, the historical Messiah, by doing two things. First, we examined some well-known Islamic parallels to his career, to establish how people in his position have normally behaved in the history of the Near East. Second, we identified the man by his special attributes, labelled him accordingly, and proceeded to separate his story from the tangle of the Gospel narratives, having already realized that the 'Jesus' of these narratives is more than one person. What transpired was the story of an Israelite prince of the royal line of David who left his native Hijaz to pursue his birthright in Palestine, but soon destroyed himself by his innocence – his failure to appreciate the hard realities of the politics in which he became involved. But what exactly happened after his death?

Here again, before attempting to reconstruct the account, an analogy might be useful to illustrate what normally happens in similar situations. In the history of Islam, the closest parallel to the tragic story of Bar Nagara is that of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad was not only the founder of a new religion, but also – like David – of a state. When he died, he was survived by one daughter, Fatima, who was married to his first cousin Ali, and there was a great quarrel among his followers as to who should succeed him as caliph (Arabic *khalifah,* meaning 'successor'). One faction, called the Shiites (meaning 'partisans'), insisted that the succession should go to his cousin and son-in-law Ali and remain restricted to his house. Others objected to this dynastic principle and pressed for different arrangements, and they won the day. The problem, however, continued; and of the first three caliphs who were chosen

among the companions of the Prophet, the second and the third were murdered. Then Ali was finally accepted as fourth caliph, but not on the basis of his dynastic claim. He too was murdered, and his two sons Hasan and Husayn did not become caliphs. Meanwhile, following the death of Ali, the caliphate of Islam (which served a purely political function) became the preserve of two dynasties: the Umayyads of Damascus, followed by the Abbasids of Baghdad, who were not descendants of the Prophet although they did belong to his tribe or clan. The Shiites, still loyal to the house of Ali, never accepted the legitimacy of their rule.

Of Ali's two sons, the eldest, Hasan, gave up his claim to the caliphate, recognized the Umayyad succession in Damascus and spent the rest of his life in retirement in the Hijaz. After he died, however, his younger brother Husayn, in AD 680, left the Hijaz to assert his right to the political succession of his maternal grandfather in Iraq, but was killed in battle before he could achieve his aspirations. According to Shiite lore, he gave up his life of relative comfort and made the bid for his birthright in the full knowledge that what awaited him was martyrdom: he repeatedly intimated this to his associates.

To the faithful followers of Husayn, his violent death in pursuit of his birthright was not the end but a new beginning for the cause he represented. They recognized his Christ-like figure as the first of a dynasty of religious guides who were his own descendants, as distinct from the descendants of his brother; and each of these Imams (meaning supreme 'leaders') was regarded in his time as the legitimate candidate for an Islamic political sovereignty which had unjustly fallen into the hands of usurping caliphs (chapter 8). Not all Shiite Muslims accepted this restriction of the Imamate to the descendants of Husayn. The Zaydi Shiites of the Yemen, for example, still maintain that any descendant of Ali, by Hasan or by Husayn, has the right to claim it. Most Shiite sects, however, adhere to the principle that the Imamate lawfully belongs to the house of Husayn. To the Ismaili Shiites, the Agha Khan is the present Imam of this house. The Twelver Shiites disagree. They maintain that the true Imams of the house of Husayn were historically twelve, the last of whom

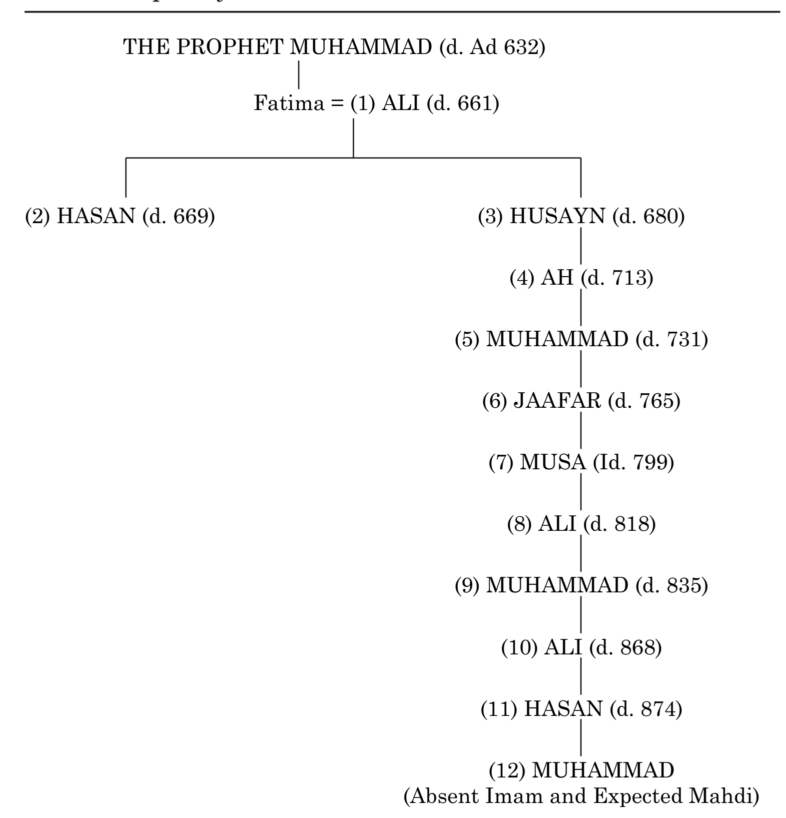


Figure 2 *The twelve Imams*

went into a cosmic *ghaybah,* or 'absence', in AD 874 or 879, to return one day as the *Mahdi* (the Islamic equivalent of the Messiah, or Christ).

Christians may sneer at the suggestion that any but their Gospel Jesus could have been a true living Christ. It cannot be denied, however, that a number of other religions in history have also had their Christs in the general sense of the term. To the Nazarene Christians of Jerusalem, the true Christ, who was Jeshu Bar Nagara, was the rightful claimant of the Israelite throne of David. To the Shiite Muslims, the Christly Imam, at any given time, is the rightful claimant of

the religious and temporal authority of the Prophet Muhammad. And the Twelver Shiites recognize a dynasty of twelve of these Imams (figure 2), the last of whom – no less than the Christian Christ – is to return one day as the Messiah.

In about AD 30, six and a half centuries before Husayn left the Hijaz for Iraq to claim the Islamic sovereignty founded by his grandfather Muhammad, and was killed in battle, Jeshu Bar Nagara left the same Hijaz for Palestine to claim the Israelite sovereignty of his ancestor David, and met a violent end: the bitter 'cup' which he, like Husayn in his time, allegedly knew that he was fated to drink.

Keeping this analogy in mind, let us first attempt to establish the persons among the family and followers of Jeshu Bar Nagara who were present at his crucifixion. Mark (15:40–1), the oldest of the canonical Gospels, speaks of 'some women' who had 'come to Jerusalem with him' and 'were there, looking on from a distance'. Three of them – identified by name as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joses and James the *Mikros* (literally, the 'little, small, short')* and Salome – were apparently members of his female household staff when he was in Galilee (the Greek verb used to describe the functions performed for him is *diakoneo,* meaning 'serve'). Matthew (27:55–6) again speaks only of female followers of Bar Nagara being present on the occasion, describing them all as women who used to 'serve' the man in Galilee. Like Mark he mentions three of them by name. In his case, they are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and 'the mother of Zebedee's children' (for Zebedee, see chapter 7). The 'mother of Zebedee's children' may have been the Salome mentioned by Mark, but she could also have been a different person.

Luke (23:49) leaves the matter ambiguous: 'All those who knew Jesus,' he said, 'including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance to watch.' He does not mention that some or all of these women had 'served' Bar

* This James the *Mikros,* on no special evidence, is commonly identified as being James the son of Alpheus (see chapter 7). The GNB renders the name of James' brother Joses as 'Joseph', because Matthew calls the Joses who was the brother of Jeshu 'Joseph'.

Nagara. Moreover, his statement, which could have been deliberately vague, implies that there may have been men as well as women followers of Bar Nagara present at his crucifixion. John (19:25–7), on the other hand, makes no reference to the members of Bar Nagara's party who watched his crucifixion from a 'distance'; he speaks only of those with whom the man could allegedly converse from the cross:

> Standing close to Jesus' cross were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, 'He is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'She is your mother.' From that time the disciple took her to live in his home.

There is no actual contradiction where the Synoptic Gospels do not mention the four close relatives and friends of Bar Nagara who John says were standing near the cross, while John does not refer to the followers watching the crucifixion from a distance. It is, however, important to note the following.

First, Mark and Matthew do not mention the presence of any male followers of Bar Nagara at the crucifixion. Luke seems to hint that there were some, without being specific. John, on the other hand, speaks of one particular male disciple who was there, but makes a point of leaving him unnamed. There must be a reason for this.

Second, Mark and Matthew include Mary Magdalene among the women who attended the crucifixion of Bar Nagara, and who used to 'serve' him when he was in Galilee. Luke does not specify that Mary Magdalene was present on the occasion, but he also leaves all the other people present unnamed. According to John, Mary Magdalene was not among those who watched the crucifixion from a distance, but actually stood near the cross with the mother and aunt of Bar Nagara and his favourite disciple. Moreover, John does not speak of Mary Magdalene as a woman who 'served' Bar Nagara when he was in Galilee.

Mary Magdalene, it seems, was one woman who definitely witnessed the crucifixion. But who was she? Mark, Matthew

and John do not mention a woman by this name on any earlier occasion. It is Luke (8:1–3) who provides some additional information about her:

> Jesus travelled through towns and villages, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom of God. The twelve disciples went with him, and so did some women who had been healed of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (who was called Magdalene), from whom seven demons had been driven out; Joanna, whose husband Chuza was an officer in Herod's court; and Susanna, and many other women who used their own resources [*huparchonta,* or 'things that are'] to help [again *diakoneo,* more correctly 'serve'] Jesus and his disciples.

Understanding the Greek *huparchonta,* as used in this context, to mean 'substance' in the sense of 'material resources', many New Testament scholars have assumed that Mary Magdalene was one of a number of well-to-do women who provided monetary support for the Master and his disciples because they believed in his mission. That one of the women who 'served' the group was a Joanna whose husband Chuza was an 'officer' or 'steward' (Greek *epitropos)* in Herod's court is taken to support this view, on the grounds that a court *epitropos* would have been a person of wealth and influence. But in the only other passage of the Gospels where the term is used the *epitropos* (literally, 'one to whom something is committed') is no more than a vineyard attendant working for a master (Matthew 20:8). Rather than being an 'officer' of Herod's court, Chuza, as an *epitropos* of this sort, was probably a domestic attendant of much humbler status, whose wife Joanna 'served' Bar Nagara and his party to supplement a meagre family income.

Giving free rein to their imagination, generations of Bible readers (but not modern scholars) have identified Mary Magdalene as none other than Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha. Those were the two sisters whom 'Jesus' (not necessarily Bar Nagara) reportedly 'loved' (John 11:5), though he apparently preferred Mary's company to Martha's (Luke 10:38–42). A resident of the same Bethany, according to John (11:1–44), was the man named Lazarus whom Jesus (again

not necessarily Bar Nagara) raised from the dead. In relating the story of Lazarus, which is exclusive to his Gospel, John initially says no more than the following: 'A man named Lazarus, who lived in Bethany, became sick. Bethany was the town where Mary and her sister Martha lived' (11:1). When the sisters went to notify Jesus of the man's sickness, their message did not speak of him as their brother, but simply said: 'Lord, your dear friend is sick' (11:3). Subsequently, however, John speaks of Mary and Martha of Bethany as the 'sisters' of Lazarus, and of Lazarus as their 'brother' (11:2, implied in 11:5, then succinctly stated again 11:19, 21, 23, 32, 39). He also makes a point of identifying Mary of Bethany with the Mary 'who poured the perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair' (11:2) at a feast held in the house of the resurrected Lazarus, which her sister Martha 'helped serve' (12:1–3). Yet according to Mark (14:3) and Matthew (26:6–7), the same dinner at Bethany where this incident took place was in the house of a certain Simon, not Lazarus; moreover, in both Gospels, the woman who 'poured the perfume on Jesus' head' (not his feet) is left unidentified.

In Luke (7:37–9), the story is completely transformed. The event is placed in the early chapters of the Gospel, when Jeshu was still reportedly in Galilee. The 'town' where it is supposed to have occurred is not identified as Bethany. The host at the dinner is neither Lazarus nor Simon, but an unnamed 'Pharisee'. The woman who annointed the guest of honour is depicted as a penitent harlot, and made to behave melodramatically like one:

> she brought an alabaster jar full of perfume and stood behind Jesus, by his feet, crying and wetting his feet with her tears. Then she dried his feet with her hair, kissed them, and poured the perfume on them. When the Pharisee saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man really were a prophet, he would know who this woman is who is touching him; he would know what kind of sinful life she lives!'

Another point worth noting here is that Luke does not speak of the sisters Mary and Martha as women of Bethany, although he mentions this town twice in his Gospel (19:29;

24:50). Clearly, there is in this case a hopeless confusion between different Jesus stories – a matter which we shall investigate in due course (chapter 11).

It is important to set the record straight with respect to Mary Magdalene, who witnessed the crucifixion. This woman was not the same person as Mary of Bethany. Certainly, she was not the woman who reportedly annointed the head or feet of Bar Nagara with perfume on a particular occasion, even if one grants that she could have also been called Mary (which is what John alone asserts). There is no indication that the Magdalene Mary was a penitent harlot. If Luke's testimony is accepted, she had simply suffered from a serious mental derangement for a long time, until the 'seven demons' possessing her were 'driven out' – an interpretation of her original condition to which many scholars today subscribe. After her cure, the pitiful Magdalene joined a retinue of women who 'served' Bar Nagara and his disciples, who were mostly unmarried young men in need of hired domestic services; the only one among them who was definitely married, for he had an ailing *penthera,* or 'mother-in-law', was Simon of Bethsaida (Mark 2:30; Luke 4:38) – 'Peter' in Matthew (8:14). As a servant rather than a personal friend of Bar Nagara, Mary Magdalene dutifully went to watch his crucifixion from a discreet distance along with other women of his itinerant domestic staff. This is what the Synoptic Gospels report; it is only in the Gospel of John that she was brought nearer to the cross. Again one must ask, why was that?

All four Gospels agree that the crucifixion occurred on a Friday: according to the Synoptic Gospels, the day of the Jewish Passover; according to John, the day before. The following day was the Sabbath; and in the early morning of the day after, which was a Sunday, Mary Magdalene, who had dutifully attended the execution of her master, just as dutifully went to his tomb to anoint his body with spices. According to John, she went alone (20:1). According to Mark (16:1), she was accompanied by the two other women who were present with her at the crucifixion; according to Luke (24:10), the two other women were Mary the mother of James (and Joses) and Joanna (the wife of the *epitropos* Chuza), with a hint that 'other women' were also present. According to

Matthew (28:1), the women were only two, Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' – the one who was the mother of James and Joses (27:56). The only point here on which all four Gospels agree is that Mary Magdalene (according to John, alone) went to the tomb.

Had the mother of Bar Nagara and his aunt been actually present at his crucifixion, standing close to his cross, they would almost certainly have been at the head of the procession of women paying the first ritual visit to his tomb. Even if the mother had been so overcome with grief that she had to stay at home, at least the aunt would have gone. The absence of both of them from the party, and the complete Gospel silence about it, is highly significant. In fact, it would seem to indicate only one thing: neither the mother nor the aunt of Bar Nagara were with him in Jerusalem when he was crucified. John mentions the presence of the mother at the crucifixion for a purpose: to plead the case of a particular disciple who was allegedly standing with her near the cross – the one who according to John, and John alone, was the disciple for whom Bar Nagara had a special affection. This disciple, according to John, was the only one who was present at the cross. Even the brothers of Bar Nagara were not there. In fact, none of the Gospels speak of any of Bar Nagara's immediate family as having been with him in Jerusalem during that fateful week. Who then was the disciple for whom John pleads a special case?

In the three other instances where John mentions the special 'disciple whom Jesus loved' (13:23; 21:7, 20), there is another disciple who is always associated with him: Simon of Bethsaida, also known as Simon Cephas, or Simon Peter *(Petros,* or 'Peter', being the Greek rendering of the Aramaic *Kifa,* or 'Cephas', meaning 'Rock'). This means that the 'beloved' disciple could not have been Simon Peter. Traditionally, it has been assumed that he was the namesake of the author of the Gospel carrying his name: John Boanerges, one "of the two 'sons of Zebedee', which seems to be correct (see below). Yet, why does the Gospel of John make a special case for him as the disciple specially 'loved' by Bar Nagara? Also, why does the same Gospel never identify him by name? John asserts the presence of the mother and aunt of Bar Nagara at

the crucifixion, which was apparently not true; and he places Mary Magdalene with them close to the cross, which was again apparently untrue. The matter is extremely suspicious. It becomes even more suspicious when we notice that the Fourth Gospel never identifies John Boanerges, or his brother James, by name, although all three Synoptic Gospels list them among Jeshu's earliest and closest followers. The only instance where he clearly referred to the brothers among the disciples, he simply called them the 'sons of Zebedee' (21:2) Could the author of the Fourth Gospel have been pleading a special case for John Boanerges, while at the same time avoiding any mention of his name – or the name of his brother to cover up some scandal which the early Christian church did not wish reopened?

In the earlier stages of our investigation, it was repeatedly observed that when Paul paid his first visit to Jerusalem, which must have been in AD 43 or more likely 44 (see chapters 1 and 2), the only apostles he met there were Simon Peter and James, the 'Lord's brother'. Fourteen years later, on his second visit to the city, he met a third apostle, John, who was associated with them in the leadership of the local Nazarene community, apparently none other than John Boanerges, the 'son of Zebedee'. Had this John been in the same position of apostolic leadership from the very beginning, Paul would have probably made a point of seeing him during his first visit to the city, as he did on the second. One would assume, therefore, that John Boanerges was not accepted as a leader among his community in AD 43 or 44, and only came to be accepted as one of its three leaders at a later time. Either Simon Peter, or James – if not both - must have initially had some reservation about him.

Such a reservation may be reflected in the Gospel of Matthew, where the 'mother of Zebedee's children' (i.e. the mother of John Boanerges) is listed among the 'serving' women who watched the crucifixion of Bar Nagara from a respectful distance. One can detect here a slur on the social status of 'Zebedee's children' as the sons of a common domestic maid, unfitted by their humble birth to assume positions of leadership. But had the mother of John Boanerges been actually present among the women servants who

watched the crucifixion, she would also have joined this domestic retinue of women when they went two days later to visit the tomb. Neither Matthew, nor any of the other Gospels, say that she did. The woman, in short, was neither a common household maid, nor a person who attended the crucifixion. Certainly, the evidence to this effect is limited to one passing reference in Matthew. Some early apostle might have circulated the rumour that John's mother was one of Bar Nagara's servants to discredit the man as a possible candidate for Bar Nagara's apostolic succession. Ultimately, this unfounded rumour found its way into the Gospel of Matthew, but not into any of the other canonical Gospels.

There was also another rumour which was apparently circulated among the early apostles to disparage the 'sons of Zebedee', who are invariably listed in order as 'James and John', indicating that James rather than John was the older of the two. One version of this clearly fabricated story stands immortalized in the Gospel of Mark (10:35–45); another is in the Gospel of Matthew (20:20–8). In both versions, the brothers are depicted as unduly ambitious men, hungry for power, who press Bar Nagara to promise them a specially favoured position alongside him when he achieves his triumph. In Mark (10:35–8), it is the brothers themselves who initiate the pressure:

> 'Teacher,' they said, 'there is something we want you to do for us . . . When you sit on your throne in your glorious Kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left.' Jesus said to them, 'You don't know what you are asking for.'

According to Matthew (20:20–4), it is the greedy mother of the two men who broaches the subject in their presence:

> Then the wife of Zebedee came to Jesus with her two sons, bowed before him, and asked him a favour . . . 'Promise me that these two sons of mine will sit at your right and your left when you are King.' 'You don't know what you are asking for,' Jesus answered the sons . . . 'I do not have the right to choose who will sit at my right and my left. These places belong to

> those for whom my Father has prepared them.' When the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with the two brothers.

What really pitted the other apostles against James and John was certainly not this. It was the plain fact that James, the older of the Boanerges brothers, emerged as the first leader of the Nazarene Way in Jerusalem after the death of Bar Nagara. The man who contested his leadership was Simon Cephas, or Peter. Peter and his younger brother Andrew, no less than James Boanerges and his brother John, were among the earliest followers of Bar Nagara, so that Peter felt no less qualified to be the leader of the community than James. With James in actual control, however, the only way Peter could effectively oppose him was to press the principle of hereditary succession to the Nazarene leadership. Bar Nagara had no children to claim the succession; but there were the 'brothers', the oldest among them being another James. This man had never been a disciple to his brother Jeshu, yet he was no less than him a 'Son of David'.

For Peter, the moment for action came shortly after AD 41, when the Romans restored for a short time the kingdom of Judea in Palestine, placing at its head a grandson of Herod the Great called Herod Agrippa (41-4). The account of the consequences of his appointment for the Nazarene community of Jerusalem, as reported by Luke in the book of Acts (12:1–17), reeks of high intrigue:

> About this time King Herod began to persecute *some members of the church* [Greek *tinas ton apo tes ekklesias*]. He had James, the brother of John, put to death by the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he went on to arrest Peter . . . So Peter was kept in jail . . . The night before Herod was going to bring him out to the people, Peter was sleeping between two guards . . . Suddenly an angel of the Lord stood there . . . The angel shook Peter by the shoulder, woke him up, and said, 'Hurry! Get up!' At once the chains fell off Peter's hands . . . Peter followed him out of the prison . . . They walked down a street, and suddenly the angel left Peter . . . he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many people

> had gathered and were praying . . . when they saw him, they were amazed. He motioned with his hand for them to be quiet, and he explained to them how the Lord had brought him out of prison. 'Tell this *to James and the rest of the brothers,'** he said; then he left and went somewhere else.

One stops here to ask: given that James Boanerges was not only the first head of the Nazarene Way in Jerusalem, but also one of its first martyrs, why does the book of Acts – which so obviously derives its information here from traditions relating to Peter – have so very little to say about him? Why does it pointedly identify him as the 'brother of John', and nothing else? Why does it specify that the persecution which resulted in his death affected only *some members of the church* – suggesting one party among the followers of the Nazarene Way - to the exclusion of others? Most important, why does the report not mention the exact nature of the message which Peter asked to be sent specifically to 'James and the rest of the brothers'?

Whatever the truth of the matter, one thing remains certain: when Paul visited Jerusalem in AD 43 or 44, James, the brother of Jeshu Bar Nagara, was already established as the uncontested leader of the Nazarene Way, with Peter at his side. Peter, it appears, had never hoped to assume the leadership; however, with James Boanerges out of the way, he had made sure that his brother John was prevented from succeeding him. Yet, John continued to have his own partisans in the movement. Meanwhile, the party of Peter did its best to disparage him and all but obliterate the memory of his dead brother as the first successor of Bar Nagara in the leadership of the Nazarene Way.

To redeem the reputation of John as a man who was not the greedy son of a woman servant, but an apostle of considerable standing with a claim to special authority, the Gospel which carries his name turned him into the special 'disciple whom Jesus loved'. To avoid arguments which were bound to arise

* In the original Greek *tois adelphois,* meaning 'the brothers', as in the AV and RSV, but freely rendered as 'the believers' in the GNB from which this quotation is taken.

over the matter, the name of the man was left unmentioned. Reading the Fourth Gospel, however, the early Christians of John's party could understand for themselves who the specially 'beloved' disciple was. To further enhance this disciple's image, the same Gospel spoke of his presence at the crucifixion, standing near to the mother of Bar Nagara and his aunt - fully identified by her personal name and that of her husband for corroborative detail. The dying Bar Nagara was also made to commend his mother to this 'beloved' disciple's care, urging her to regard him as her son in his place. Mary Magdalene was the one person whom everybody agreed was present at the crucifixion, watching it from a distance. John made her stand near the cross to suggest (but not actually say) that she was also a witness to what Bar Nagara told his mother and his 'beloved' disciple on the occasion.

Of what happened on the third day after the crucifixion, John adds yet another story in which the same 'beloved' disciple plays a leading part, and to which Mary Magdalene is again a witness (John 20:1-19):

> Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the entrance. She went running to Simon Peter and *the other disciple, whom Jesus loved,* and told them . . . Then Peter and the other disciple went to the tomb. The two of them were running, *but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and reached the tomb first.* He bent over and saw the linen wrappings, but he did not go in. Behind him came Simon Peter, and he went straight into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth which had been round Jesus' head. . . Then *the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in; he saw and believed.* (*They still did not understand the scripture which said that he must rise from death.*) Then the disciples went back home. Mary stood crying outside the tomb . .. 'They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him!' Then she turned round and saw Jesus there .. . She thought he was the gardener. . . Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned towards him and said in Hebrew 'Rabboni!' (this means 'Teacher.') 'Do not hold on to

> me,' Jesus told her, '. . . But go to my brothers . . .' So Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her. It was late that Sunday evening, and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities.

The many inconsistencies in the various Gospel accounts of the Resurrection have long attracted notice. Since the earliest days of Gospel criticism, there has always been a strong suspicion that none of them tells the exact truth. According to the Gospel of John, the first and only person who saw the resurrected Bar Nagara standing near his empty tomb was Mary Magdalene, which is perfectly plausible for those who cannot believe that dead people can possibly return to life. With her history of emotional disturbance, as noted by Luke (see above), the Magdalene, it has been suggested, must have had a hallucination about the empty tomb and the risen 'Jesus'. All four Gospels agree that Mary Magdalene was a witness to the Resurrection on the very day it occurred. In John, she is the only witness: she alone stays behind, seeing her resurrected master and conversing with him. Simon Peter and the 'beloved' disciple only see the empty tomb, after which they return home. But the same Gospel also quotes the Magdalene's words in the original Aramaic as she exclaims 'RabboniP upon recognizing her risen master (as a term of address, 'Rabboni' has the general sense of 'Master' as well the more restricted sense of 'Teacher'). This lends John's account of the Resurrection a special credibility with respect to the Magdalene being the sole witness.

Rather than dwell on the question of whether or not the Resurrection actually happened, it would be more useful for our present purpose to concentrate on the marginal details of the account of the event as presented by John. If the disciples of Bar Nagara had dispersed in different directions immediately following his arrest; moreover, if they really did stay in great terror 'behind locked doors' for days after his crucifixion; how did Mary Magdalene so easily discover their hiding place or places, and so readily persuade two of them to brave all danger and follow her to the empty tomb? Granting that she

did manage to do this, why did the other Gospels remain completely silent about the matter? Moreover, why does the Fourth Gospel single out Simon Peter and John as the only two disciples to actually see the empty tomb? Why the repeated mention that it was the 'beloved' disciple who reached the place first, while admitting that Simon Peter was the first who actually 'went in'? Why the insistence that it was the 'beloved' disciple who *'saw and believed',* while Simon Peter only *saw* the empty tomb and the abandoned linen cloth of the shroud?

The Fourth Gospel, written at a time when the early church in Jerusalem was still divided between partisans of Peter and partisans of John, attempts initially to strike a conciliatory balance between the claims of these two apostles to special prominence and authority. Thus, both are depicted as the disciples who were priviliged to see the empty tomb of their Master, when none of the other disciples do. They both reportedly ran to the place, John *reaching* first, but Peter being the first to *enter*. Later, the balance in the story is slightly tipped in favour of John. He *saw and believed*. Peter *saw,* but there is a subtle hint that he was among those who 'still did not understand the scripture which said that he must rise from death'.

This tipping of the balance of privilege in favour of John becomes more openly noticeable in the last chapter of the Fourth Gospel, where the account of the last conversation the resurrected Bar Nagara had with these two special disciples is related (John 21:15–24):

> After they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon . . . do you love me more than these others do?' 'Yes, Lord,' he answered, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Take care of my lambs' . . . Peter was sad because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' . . . Peter turned round and saw behind him that other disciple, whom Jesus loved ... he asked Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus answered him, 'If I want him to live until I come, what is that to you?' . . . So a report spread among the followers of Jesus that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he said, 'If I want him to live until I come, what is that to you?' He

> is the disciple who spoke of these things, *the one who also wrote them down;* and we know that what he said is true.

Unlike the Fourth Gospel, the three Synoptic Gospels seem to favour the claim of Simon Peter, not John, to apostolic supremacy (Mark 8:27–30; Matthew 16:13–-20; Luke 9:18–21). Mark and Matthew, as already noticed, dwell on the greed of John and his older brother; of the two Gospels, Matthew went further in the disparagement of their reputation by suggesting that their equally greedy mother was no more than a common housemaid. Matthew, it must be stressed here, was the Gospel writer who pleaded the cause of Peter most explicitly (16:13–19):

> Jesus . . . asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' 'Some say John the Baptist,' they answered. 'Others say Elijah, while others say Jeremiah or some other prophet.' 'What about you?' he asked them. 'Who do you say 1 am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' 'Good for you, Simon . . .' answered Jesus. 'For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. And so I tell you, Peter (*Petros*): you are a rock (*petra*), and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.'

Whatever their rival claims to special apostolic authority, however, neither Simon Peter nor John Boanerges were descendants of David. After the martyrdom of James Boanerges, it was James Bar Nagara – the 'Lord's brother' – who assumed the leadership of the Nazarene Way in Jerusalem as the representative of the sacred Davidic line, with Peter as his right-hand man, while John was kept out of their closed circle. James Bar Nagara owed his succession to the Nazarene leadership to the machinations of Peter, no doubt in the face of strong opposition from John who had aspired to this leadership himself. Once at the head of the Jerusalem church,

however, the 'Lord's brother' exhibited such high-handedness in the management of the community that Peter had second thoughts about him – or so it seems. Thus, before long, he made peace with John Boanerges, his former rival, and brought him into the closed circle of the Jerusalem leadership. When Paul visited Jerusalem for the first time after his conversion in AD 43 or 44, the leaders of the community he met in the city were only two: James 'the Lord's brother' and Peter. However, fourteen years later, on his second visit, he met three leaders of the Jerusalem church: James, Peter and John. And the man who was still in supreme command, now as the head of the triumvirate, was James.

Remarkably, when Bar Nagara was alive, he had cared little for his family. When they left the Hijaz and followed him to Palestine, he did not express delight in receiving them (chapter 8), According to John (7:5), they (or at least his 'brothers' among them) did not believe in him. Before fleeing Galilee to go to Jerusalem, he probably made arrangements for them to stay with their immigrant kinsfolk in that region, where some of their descendants were still living in the second century AD (chapter 3). There is no reason to believe that any of them accompanied him to Jerusalem, or that any of them were present at his crucifixion.

After his death, however, some members of the family, including his mother (Acts 1:14), left Galilee and arrived in the holy city. Among them, one assumes, was Jeshu's brother James (Galatians 1:19; 2:9; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Whether James immediately made a claim to his dead brother's succession, or whether it was Peter who first put the idea in his head, we cannot know. But James was as much an Israelite prince of the blood as his brother; and he also claimed that he had independently seen the resurrected 'Christ' (1 Corinthians 15:7).

Finally, James did become the paramount head of the Nazarene Way in Jerusalem. Later Christian tradition referred to him as *Iakobos Iostos* (in Latin *Justus*), usually rendered into English as 'James the Just', or 'James the Righteous' – an epithet taken to refer to his strictness in upholding the Israelite law. In the Semitic languages, however, the terms denoting 'justice' and 'righteousness' also

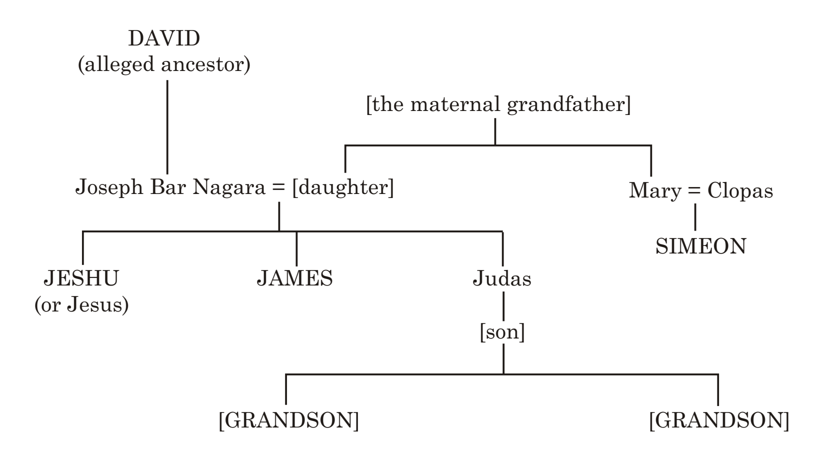


Figure 3 *The 'bishops' of Jerusalem*

denote 'legitimacy', or 'lawfulness' of succession. So the title is better rendered in English as 'James the Legitimate', in the sense of the lawful hereditary succession to the Nazarene leadership which he claimed and received. After his death in AD 62, James was succeeded by his cousin Simeon, the son of his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas. Other members of his family, including two grandsons of his brother Judas, or Jude (chapter 3), continued to succeed as 'bishops' of Jerusalem until the Nazarenes and the Jews were finally expelled from the city by the Roman emperor Hadrian in AD 135: this is according to the fourth-century church historian Eusebius of Caesaria, quoting the earlier authority of the second-century Christian writer Hegesippus. That these 'bishops' of Jerusalem – called by early church historians the 'bishops of the circumcision' – were in fact a dynasty claiming their position on the grounds of their blood relationship to the 'Lord' is generally conceded today. At least two of them, other than James, are remembered as 'Justus'. A genealogical table of these 'legitimate' bishops of Jerusalem whose exact relationship to Jeshu Bar Nagara is known can be reconstructed (figure 3).

Whatever the faith upheld by James and the apostles of the Nazarene Way may have been, it was not the Christianity we

know. In any case, its preaching had its centre in Jerusalem and Judea, where the Nazarene Way – along with the dynasty wielding leadership over it – vanished from existence in AD 135, three years after the suppression of the Second Jewish Revolt in Palestine. Paul, in his time, did not approve of the Jerusalem preaching. As an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, he would not have had much enthusiasm for pretensions to political or religious authority based on claims of Davidic descent: David was of the tribe of Judah and had originally wrested the throne of Israel from King Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, to make it forever the preserve of his family. This was possibly one reason why he strongly disliked James (see chapter 2). But Paul's interpretation of the significance of the career of Bar Nagara as the 'Christ Jesus', or more simply 'Jesus Christ', was radically different from the Jerusalem interpretation.

Leaving James and the Nazarene apostles to preach in Palestine as they pleased, struggling at the same time with their material poverty, Paul preached his Christianity among far more prosperous communities of Gentiles and Jews: in Antioch and Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. Wherever he went, he founded rich churches which he managed to keep more or less under control. When the Nazarene Christians of Judea were finally dispersed along with the Jews of the region, their Jerusalem church vanished with them. In other parts of the Roman world, however, the different preaching of Paul and the churches he founded were able to continue. The repeated persecutions suffered by his followers during his lifetime, and after his death, failed to destroy their faith, and even contributed to its strengthening.

So, ultimately, it was the Christianity of Paul that survived; but the memory of the old Nazarene Way of Jerusalem was still there. In his own time, Paul had fought its preaching as hard as he could; but the fact remained that its apostles were the original followers of the Master. Somehow, the traditions they left behind had to be accommodated by the Christian canon after Paul's death. The Gospels of this canon, as their texts survive to the present day, represent four different attempts at such accommodation. This is why they are so full of contradictions, to the manifest

despair of all New Testament scholars who have attempted to study them as historical documents.

Two of these Gospels – Luke and John – clearly fuse the story of the Jesus who was Jeshu Bar Nagara with that of another, much earlier Jesus called Issa, reportedly the virgin-born son of a woman called Mary. This, however, does not account for all the contradictions one comes across in the four Gospels. There is certainly more extraneous material in these confused texts to reckon with.

So far, our investigation has proceeded from one clue: Paul's visit to Arabia immediately following his conversion. From this point, we cannot further unravel the mystery without another clue.

10 The God Who Became Christ

THE clue we require has always been there in the Gospel of John, where it invariably catches the eye without being appreciated for its true worth. It is to be found in the elaborate speeches where the Jesus of this Gospel is made to speak of himself in the most extravagant terms. The overbearing tone of these orations is completely out of character with the Jesus who emerges elsewhere in the Gospels. For he is purported to say, 'Happy are those who are humble' (Matthew 5:5); but in John (4:32; 6:35; 7:37; 8:12; 10:10, 11, 30; 11:25–6; 15:1–3, 5):

> I have food to eat that you know nothing about... I am the *bread of life* ... He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never be thirsty.
>
> Whoever is thirsty should come to me and drink.
>
> I am the *light of the world* .. . Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness.
>
> I have come in order that you might have *life - life in all its fullness.*
>
> I am the *good shepherd,* who is willing to die for the sheep.
>
> *My Father and I are one.*
>
> I am *the resurrection and the life.* Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?
>
> I am *the real vine, and my Father is the gardener.* He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and

> bear more fruit. You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you.
>
> I am *the vine, and you are the branches.* Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for *you can do nothing without me.*

Human beings cannot easily make such presumptuous statements about themselves without placing their sanity in question – a matter which John actually notes (10:19). The particular Jesus to whom these statements were ascribed, however, need not have been human. Certainly he could not, I suggest, have been the man who preached the virtues of selflessness and humility in the Sermon on the Mount; nor could he have been Issa, the prophet of the Nazarene Gospel, who was apparently a strict monotheist in the tradition of Moses, except that he taught a more liberal interpretation of the law. Jeshu Bar Nagara, as a claimant of David's throne, would never have spoken of himself in such terms, which far exceed the Old Testament concept of the Messiah. Had he done so, the young Prince of Israel would have wrecked any chance of realizing his political ambitions from the very beginning, long before he committed the fatal imprudences that led to his crucifixion.

The person of the 'I am' statements of the Fourth Gospel was definitely not a human being. He was a god. More than that, he was a god of fertility: 'I have come in order that you might have life'; 'Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.' In the lore of the ancient Near East, the fertility gods are beyond count. Is it possible that there was a 'Jesus' among them?

According to the Koran, some of the followers of Issa, the Jesus of the Nazarene Gospel, used to worship him in error as a god (chapter 4). This could mean that the identity of Issa came to be confused in some Nazarene circles with that of a deity by the same name – a confusion which was still in existence with the advent of Islam in the seventh century AD. It is intriguing that in the West Arabian regions of the Hijaz and Asir, no less than seven villages are called Al Issa (locally pronounced *Il 'Isa,* or *El 'Isa,* literally the 'God Issa'),

thus immortalizing the name 'Jesus' as that of a deity. Other variants of the name, such as *Al 'Ays* (the 'God of Semen') and *Al 'Ayyash* (the 'Life-Giving God') are also abundant.

Such place names apart, there is also epigraphic proof that a deity whose name was no different from that of Issa in consonantal spelling was actually worshipped at one time in Western Arabia. Inscriptions in an ancient Arabian script called Thamudic, discovered in the northern Hijaz and dated between the second century BC and the second century AD, make three clear references to a god whose name is spelt *'s** It has been assumed that the name in question was pronounced *'Ass,* to mean 'the one who keeps watch by night', in reference to a moon god. This, however, is no more than speculation, with no evidence to support it. The Thamudic language was a form of Arabic; and in most Arabic dialects, the diphthong *ay* is often pronounced as a homogenized *i* (as in the English 'eel') or *e* (as in the English 'fair' or 'bear'). Thus words such as *'ayl* (normally written *'yl,* and meaning 'god'), because they were actually pronounced *il* or *el,* were frequently written simply as 7 (with the dropping of the medial semivowel), in keeping with the actual vocalization. By the same token, the name of the god *'s* is far more likely to have been *'Ays* (dialectically pronounced 7s), in reference to a god called *'Isa)* rather than *'Ass.* The fact that there are a number of West Arabian villages which still carry the name of *'tea* (not of *'Ass)* as a god lends strong support for this view.

There are matters even more intriguing. Of the seven villages called exactly Al Issa, three are found in the Taif region of the Hijaz, and four in Asir. Of the latter, three are clustered in the same neighbourhood, near the town of Muhayil. They are called Marwah (written *mrwt)* Al Issa, Khayal (written *hyl,* Arabic form of the Aramaic *hyl)* Al Issa, and Mishbah Al Issa. In Arabic, these three contruct names are meaningless. One may assume, therefore, that they represent Arabic corruptions of earlier Aramaic names. In this case, the original forms would have been *Marut* (written

* Albert Van den Branden, *Les Inscriptions thamoudeenes* (Paris, 1950), pp. 59, 69. The inscriptions referring to this god are listed as HUB 48, HUB 57 (10); EUT. 87.

mrwt) Al 'Isa, meaning the 'dominion of the God Issa'; *Hayl Al 'Isa,* meaning the 'power of the God Issa'; and (as in the existing form) *Mishbah Al 'Isa,* meaning the 'glory of the God Issa'. These three attributes of the divinity of the God Issa, with 'kingdom' substituted for 'dominion' (both words denoting sovereign control), can be read in the familiar 'Lord's Prayer' which Jeshu Bar Nagara reportedly taught to his followers (Matthew 6:13): 'For thine is the *kingdom,* and the *power,* and the *glory,* for ever.'*

Certainly, an ancient god called Issa, or Jesus, was worshipped in Arabia at one time. Not only this, but his divine person was associated with some kind of trinity: Lordship, Power and Glory. This trinity of the Arabian God Jesus must have antedated the conventional Christian Trinity of the 'Father', the 'Son' and the 'Holy Spirit' by many centuries. The names of its three 'persons', or concepts, are different. They survive as the names of three villages of the same West Arabian neighbourhood, which were originally centres for the worship of the God Jesus in his three different attributes.

Linguistically, the name Issa *('Isa)* is the Aramaic form of the Arabic *al-'ays,* meaning 'the water of the male', in reference to the masculine semen, the suffixed *a* in *'Isa* being the Aramaic definite article. Related to this term is the Arabic *'Aysh,* meaning 'life' (as in *Al 'Ayyash,* see above). The Jesus of the 'I am' statements was none other than the God Jesus who was *Al 'Isa* or *Al 'Ays* – the ultimate source of the fertilizing 'Power' of the male.t In one passage of his Gospel, John unknowingly gives the secret away by relating the following story: (4:5–16, condensed to bring out the essentials):

> In Samaria he came to a town named Sychar. Tired out by the journey, [he] sat down by the well. A Samaritan woman came to draw some water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink of

* Scholars have demonstrated beyond doubt that this final passage of the Lord's prayer is a late addition to its original text. The question, however, remains: where did it come from?

† See the analysis of the Genesis story of the twins Esau and Jacob as mythology in *Secrets of the Bible People.*

> water . . . If you only knew who it is who is asking for a drink, you would ask him, and he would give you *life-giving water.'* 'Sir,' the woman said, 'you don't have a bucket, and the well is deep. Where would you get that *life-giving water?'* Jesus answered, 'Whoever drinks this water will get thirsty again, *but whoever drinks the water that I will give will never be thirsty again.* The water that I will give him *will become in him a spring which will provide him with the life-giving water and give him eternal life.* 'Sir,' said the woman, 'give me that water!' *'Go and call your husband,'* Jesus told her, 'and come back.'

The Jesus who met a woman at a well and spoke to her in these terms has nothing to do with Palestine. His 'Samaria' (the *Shomeron* of the Old Testament) (as I identified it in *The Bible Came from Arabia)* is the present village and tribal territory of Shimran (the exact Biblical name) in the West Arabian province of Asir. We can be certain of this because no place called Sychar (transliteration of a Semitic *skr, sqr* or *sqr)* is to be found in the Nablus region which is the 'Samaria' of Palestine (see chapter 5). In Western Arabia, however, a place by the identical name – in Arabic form, *$iqar* – is located in the close neighbourhood of the present Shimran (or 'Samaria') territory.

The setting of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, as told by John, must have been this same Arabian 'Sychar', or Siqar. The 'Jesus' of this story was the god Al Issa. This god alone had the *Power* to provide 'life-giving water' – the miraculous *'ays* which is transformed into a 'spring' not in the woman, but in the man to whom he gives it: 'Go and call your husband and come back!' In the original cult of this god of male fertility, the concept of eternity was probably biological, envisaged in terms of the continuity of the male seed. In the more evolved forms of the cult of the god Jesus, this primitive concept of biological eternity appears to have acquired a more mystical significance. The man who receives the 'life-giving water' from the god becomes personally endowed with *eternal life.*

As the ultimate masculine source of life, Al Issa was conceived of as being his own father: 'My father and I are

one!' The fertility with which he endows mankind through the male becomes a triumph of life over death, promising eternal life to those who accept his 'life-giving water'. This is the supreme mystery: 'I am the resurrection and the life . . . and whoever believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' In other mystery religions of the ancient Near East there are a number of fertility gods who assume human form and are treacherously killed by adversaries, only to rise from death and bring life again to the world.

The conclusion is inescapable: the composite Jesus of Paul who was betrayed and died on the cross, then rose from death to bring salvation to the world, was none other than the Arabian god Jesus. The risen 'Lord' of the Gospels was the same person. The historical Bar Nagara died on the cross in Jerusalem, and that was the end of his story. It was as the god Jesus that he rose from the tomb.

Apart from his ability to give 'eternal life' to those who received his 'life-giving water', Al Issa also had the *Power* to redeem the dead: 'Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies!' In this particular capacity, he must have also been worshipped under the attested name of Dhu Khulasah, the 'God of Redemption'. In the early seventh century, the worship of Dhu Khulasah was still popular in some Arabian regions; its principal sanctuary was somewhere south of Mecca – the famous *al-Ka'bah al-Yamaniyah* (the 'Southern Kaaba'), rivalling that of Mecca, and believed to have been located in Tubalah, in inland Asir. After the triumph of Islam, Muhammad, we are told, sent a party of his followers to destroy the idol of Dhu Khulasah which stood there – a sculpture of white stone depicting a phallus topped by a crown. The cult of Dhu Khulasah, however, was subsequently resurrected in the region, where it survived until 1815. In that year, the Wahhabis organized a special military campaign to suppress remnants of pagan worship in different parts of Asir, and the reconstructed idol of Dhu Khulasah in his original Kaaba of Tubalah was destroyed by gunfire.

The original, sophisticated fusion between the historical Bar Nagara and the mythological Al Issa, or Dhu Khalasah, must have been the work of Paul. Having been raised as a strict Jew, Paul was initially repelled by the claim of Bar Nagara's

disciples that their Master had risen from death after his crucifixion, leaving behind an empty tomb. For this reason, Paul began by persecuting the Nazarene Way which preached the gospel of Bar Nagara's resurrection, until one day he was suddenly converted to the idea by what he describes as a personal revelation. We may recall his own words here (2 Corinthians 12:2–4, fully quoted in chapter 1):

> I know a certain Christian man who fourteen years ago was snatched up to the highest heaven . . . and there he heard things which cannot be put into words, things that human lips may not speak.

In the mystery religions of the ancient Near East, the central concept of the death and resurrection of the god was normally a 'secret' only communicated to deserving initiates. For example, having been inducted into the cult of Osiris when he visited Egypt in the fifth century BC, the Greek historian Herodotus made a point of keeping its secrets to the extent that he never mentioned Osiris by name. Whenever he referred to this god, it was invariably by an allegory, with the explanation that it was improper for his name to be pronounced by human lips.

Surmising that 'God's secret' or 'secrets' (e.g. 1 Corinthians 4:1; Colossians 1:27; 2:3) – a mystery 'hid through all past ages' (Colossians 1:26) – could only be fully discovered in Arabia (which he knew to be the birthplace of Jeshu Bar Nagara, see chapter 2), Paul immediately went there. What he found, among other things (such as the Nazarene Gospel of the prophet Issa, see chapter 5), was the living cult of Al Issa, or Dhu Khalasah, and its scriptures. He brought these back with him – one or more of the books of 'parchment' which he kept strictly for himself while he lived. In these precious scriptures, the 'great secret of our religion' (as he put it) was mystically expressed in statements such as the following (1 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 2:11–13):

> He appeared in human form,
> was shown to be right by the Spirit,
> and was seen by angels.

He was preached among the nations,
was believed in thoughout the world,
and was taken up to heaven.

If we have died with him,
we shall also live with him.

If we continue to endure,
we shall also rule with him.

If we deny him,
he also will deny us.

If we are not faithful,
he remains faithful,
because he cannot be false to himself.

What a sublime message of faith, hope and love! How different from the primitive, didactic preachings of the Nazarene apostles, huddled in the slums of Jerusalem and quibbling as to how much the law of Moses could be relaxed to accommodate Gentile converts to their Way! Here, to Paul, was something that went beyond the law, even to surpass the most inspired visions of the prophets: a god of love who was not transcendental to humanity, but one in whose divinity all mankind could fully share. By comparison with this wonderful concept of complete intimacy between the divine and the human, the teachings of the Jerusalem apostles were insignificant. Apart from faith in the risen Master as the promised Israelite Messiah, or Christ, and the ritual of the Last Supper which this Christ had enjoined his disciples to keep, these self-styled 'apostles' had little to offer. In the cult of this god Jesus, by contrast, there was a wealth of vision: a highly developed metaphysical and ethical concept expressed in the allegorical language of mythology with the utmost subtlety.

Paul probably made up his mind about what he was going to preach before leaving Arabia to return to Damascus. The man who died on the cross in Jerusalem in his own time – 'as to his humanity, a descendant of David' (Romans 1:3) and 'the son of a human mother' (Galatians 4:4) – was the ultimate manifestation of the god Jesus of Arabia who dies as a human being then rises from death to give true life to all the world forever. The acceptance of this God and his 'plan' for mankind

was all that counted. The 'Old Testament' (2 Corinthians 3:14) of Moses which had been reserved for the people of Israel alone was now obsolete, along with its law. To replace it, there was now a 'New Testament' (1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6): a Gospel or 'Good News' (Greek *euaggelion)* not only for Israel, but for all 'nations'. All that had to be done was to identify the Christ of the Nazarenes with the person of Jesus as the god who 'appeared in human form' and was 'seen by the angels', and the message of the 'New Testament' would be clear (Galatians 3:24–5):

> the Law was in charge of us until Christ came, in order that we might be put right with God through faith. Now that the time for faith is come, the Law is no longer in charge of us.

In the original Arabian cult of the god Jesus, this god was not the creator of the universe. He was only the source of life. The creator was another, older god – perhaps the 'Ancient of Days' (Aramaic *'Attiq Yomin)* spoken of by the prophet Daniel (7:9, 13, 22). With respect to such an 'Ancient of Days', who was the original 'Father' of creation, the god Jesus was an eternally youthful and life-giving 'Son'.* As the cult developed, the 'Father' and the 'Son' came to be regarded as a single god, the 'Father' in this god being able to communicate directly with mankind as the 'Son' who dies as a man and rises from death. Identifying the 'Son' as the contemporary Christ - Jeshu Bar Nagara - who had actually died on the cross in Jerusalem not many years before, Paul became convinced that the 'secret' must finally be revealed, not only to his own people, but to the whole world (Colossians 1:25–7):

* In speaking of the authority given by the 'Father' to the 'Son' to be the ultimate judge of mankind at the time of the Resurrection, the Gospel of John (5:27–9) echoes the words of Daniel (12:2) who alone among the Old Testament prophets spoke of the 'Ancient of Days'. Hence the possibility that this 'Ancient of Days' was the 'Father' of the cult in question. The 'Ancient of Days' also features in passages from the apocryphal First Book of Enoch (chapters 37–72), once thought to date from the second century BC, but now believed by some scholars to be Christian esoteric apocrypha based on Daniel and dating from no earlier than the third century AD.

> I have been made a servant of the church by God, who gave me this task . . . *of fully proclaiming his message,* which is the *secret* he hid through all past ages from all mankind, but has now revealed to his people. God's plan is to make known his secret to his people, this rich and glorious secret which he has *for all peoples.* And *the secret is that Christ is in you* [Greek *humin,* strictly 'to you'], which means that *you will share in the glory of God.*

The mystery of the Arabian god Jesus did not only involve the eternal coexistence of a 'Father' and a 'Son'. Its scriptures also referred to a 'Spirit' by which the god was 'shown to be right' (the Greek verb used is *dikaioo,* 'declare to be right') when he manifested himself in human form (1 Titus 3:16). So, there was a third 'secret' to the cult - the 'secret' of the 'Spirit' which attested to the truth of the central mystery of the God who became Man. While Paul frequently spoke of the 'Father' (or 'God') and the 'Son' (or 'Christ') in conjunction, elaborating to some extent on the intimate union between them, there is only one detectable instance where he spoke at the same time of the 'Spirit'. Normally, Paul ended his epistles with statements such as 'May God's grace be with you', or 'May Christ's grace be with you'. In one epistle, however, the ending is as follows: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Corinthians 13:13). It was only after Paul's death that Matthew (28:19–20) gave the first articulation of the notion of the 'Holy Trinity', subsequently elaborated by the Christian church, where he made his Jesus say to his disciples after his resurrection: 'Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit . . . And I will be with you always, to the end of the age.'

It was observed in chapter 9 that the original concept of the Trinity in the Arabian Jesus cult did not involve the 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit', but three other attributes of the deity: the 'Dominion' *(marut),* the 'Power' *(hayl),* and the 'Glory' *(mishbah).* Interestingly, it was Matthew who first spoke of the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and also cited the earlier trinity of the Kingdom, the Power and

the Glory in the text he gave of the 'Lord's Prayer'. Thus, in post-Pauline Christianity, a new trinity was substituted for an older one.

The purpose of our investigation, however, is not to trace the beginnings and development of Christian theology. Our question is a historical one, concerning the identity of Jesus, and why Paul and the Gospels speak about him as they do. At this point, it is necessary to recall what was noted in an earlier chapter concerning one of the accepted theories regarding the composition of the three Synoptic Gospels. Mark was the oldest of these Gospels, and its material was later used by Matthew and Luke. This much is obvious to anyone reading the Gospels, even in translation: if for nothing else, because the basic material in Mark is found in Matthew and Luke, while important materials in Matthew and Luke are not found in Mark. According to the theory, there was a source other than Mark which both Matthew and Luke used: the so-called Q (from the German *Quelle,* for 'source'), which was also in the Greek language. This is clear because there are passages in Matthew and Luke which do not come from Mark, yet are textuaily identical, or virtually so. Had this common source been in Aramaic, or in any language other than Greek, the renderings of the same passages derived from this common Q into the Greek of the two Gospels would have been different.

The theory, however, recognizes a special source for Luke: the 'Luke' source, called L, which is believed to have been Aramaic. We know that Luke could read Aramaic because of the striking unity of his Greek style where he directly quotes from sources in languages other than Greek. For example, where he copies the 'we-passages' in the book of Acts from the travelling diary of one of Paul's companions (chapter 1), his personal style in Greek remains noticeable, which indicates that his source was in another language (what other than Aramaic?) which he could read and translate by himself. The same applies to the unity of style maintained by Luke where he copies from L.

We earlier proposed, on the basis of evidence from the Koran and of Islamic tradition, that L was the Gospel of the Nazarenes: an account concerning an Arabian Israelite

prophet called Issa who lived in about 400 BC. We further know that L was also used by John. While Luke derived some of his special Jesus stories from L, John ignored its narrative parts, and became aware that the Jesus who was the son of Mary was not the same Jesus who was the son of Joseph. From this source John derived his peculiar theory of Jesus as the *logos,* or 'Word', who promised the coming of the *parakletos,* or 'Comforter' (see chapters 4 and 5). It also became clear to us that John used the special terminology of the Nazarene Gospel to construct his theory of the Jesus who died on the cross in Jerusalem, while being fully aware of the fact that this Nazarene Gospel was concerned with a different Jesus. Luke used the same source without appearing to be aware of this fact (chapter 6).

The theory under consideration further maintains that Matthew also had a source for his Gospel which he alone used – the 'Matthew', or M source – probably an Aramaic one, or at least one whose original was in Aramaic. From Q he took the materials which are also used by Luke; from M he took the materials which are peculiar to his own Gospel. Without having a base document to help us determine what Q and M actually were (we have the Koran with respect to L), they must remain subject to conjecture. This, however, does not mean that we cannot investigate the broader question of the Gospel sources at another level. We can start from points already determined, and their corollaries:

1 Luke could read Aramaic as well as Greek.
2 The L source used by Luke was also used by John but not by Matthew. This can mean that no complete translation of L into Greek was available, so Matthew could not use it because he could not read Aramaic.
3 When the source is in Greek, the same materials derived from it by the different Gospels would be more or less textually identical. If the source is not Greek, translations of the same passages from it would differ from one Gospel to another.
4 John was more perceptive than Luke regarding the nature of the L source and the special identity of its Jesus, which eluded Luke. He was also more subtle in concealing the

special manner in which he used this source. The same subtlety could also have been used in other instances.

5 A Gospel source other than L could have existed in an Aramaic original as well as in Greek translation. In such cases, a highly perceptive Gospel author who could read Aramaic, such as John, would have gone to the Aramaic original. A less perceptive one, such as Luke, would have found it easier to use the Greek translation. If Matthew had no knowledge of Aramaic, which was apparently the case, he would also have used the Greek translation.

6 In the original of an Aramaic source, the special identity of its special Jesus would have been easier to discern. In a translation of the same source, this special identity is likely to have been blurred: intentionally, by deliberate omissions and twisted renderings of the original; unintentionally, by inaccuracies in translation.

7 If John used L in a different way than Luke did, which is what has hitherto given the impression that L was a special Luke source, the same could have been the case with other Aramaic sources which John and Luke were at liberty to use either in the original language or in Greek translation. Matthew could only use the Greek translation.

8 Each Gospel author may have had a different axe to grind. We already know, for example, that Matthew pleaded a special case for the apostle Peter, while John did the same for the apostle John (chapter 9). Certainly Matthew and John could have used the same material from a common source to serve their different ends. The same could have applied to Luke, though not necessarily.

Among the peculiarities of the Gospel of John are the 'I am' statements attributed to his Jesus; also, the account of the conversation between this Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar. We have suggested that the Jesus in question was the fertility god Al Issa, also known in his special capacity as the 'Redeemer God' as Dhu Khulasah. John must have derived the materials in his Gospel about this god Jesus from the Aramaic scriptures of his Arabian cult – the same document or set of documents from which Paul constructed his image of Jesus Christ as the 'Son of God'

who was co-eternal with his 'Father'. Assuming that these scriptures, which Paul had kept secret during his life, were discovered and translated into Greek after his death, so that they could be used either in the Aramaic original or in an available Greek translation by the authors of the Gospels, it would have been in character for John to go to the Aramaic original, and for Luke to be satisfied with the existing translation. As for Matthew, he would only have been able to use the translation, so that his own quotations from this source would have been more or less the same as Luke's. Having written his gospel before this source became available in a Greek translation, Mark would not have used it.

Having established these hypothetical premises, we can proceed to test them, to determine their possible veracity. Three examples which are immediately detectable would be sufficient for the purpose:

1 The Jesus of John, in speaking of himself as the 'good shepherd' (see above), says: 'As the Father knows me, I know the Father' (10:15, in correct rendering from the Greek of the Gospel). In Matthew (11:27), we read: 'No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.' This same statement is also found in Luke (10:22), but not in Mark.

2 John says (3:35): 'The Father loves his Son and has put everything in his power.' According to Matthew (11:27), Jesus himself says: 'My Father has given me all things.' Luke (10:22) repeats the same statement. Mark again is silent.

3 According to John (20:22–3), Jesus 'breathed' on his disciples to endow them with his authority and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.' According to Matthew (16:18–19), Jesus singled out Peter to endow him with this special authority, saying to him: 'what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven' (in another version, this time as an address to all the disciples: 'What you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven', 18:18). Luke does not quote this statement, nor is it found in Mark.

From all three of these examples, it would seem clear that there was one source which Matthew and John used. From the first two, it would seem equally clear that Luke had access to the same source. The two available quotations of Matthew and Luke from this source are identical. In both cases, and also in the quotation which Luke omits, John renders the essence of the statement differently. Since John could read Aramaic, and Matthew presumably could not, John in all three cases must have been making his own translations from the Aramaic original of the source, while Luke as well as Matthew were resorting to an available Greek translation.

In all three statements, as rendered by John and the others, Jesus is made to speak with an authority which is far more in character with a god than with a man. The first of these statements in John is included in an 'I am' speech. The second articulates the concepts of the 'Father and the Son'. The third relates to a divine authority which is communicated to disciples who are ordinary human beings, no doubt by the only person entitled to do so, who is the deity himself. The source of all three statements, the evidence suggests, is the scriptures of the Arabian Jesus cult.

For our present purpose, it is not necessary to go through John, Matthew and Luke, passage by passage and sentence by sentence, to discover what was the source of each statement in each of the three Gospels. However, four sources are certainly involved. First, there is the early Greek Gospel of Mark, which put together various traditions of Jesus which had survived in different Christian circles since the time of the apostles. Second, there is the Nazarene Gospel of the Arabian prophet Issa, who lived about four centuries before the time of the Jesus of Christian convention. Third, there are the scriptures of the Arabian god Jesus, Al Issa, also called Dhu Khulasah, which could have comprised more than one document. Fourth, we have Paul's special vision of Jesus as the living Christ who is the eternal 'Son of God', which is detectable in all four Gospels. (See figure 4.)

Further than this, one can only speculate. Yet, it will do no harm to speculate. In the Koran, we have the tantalizing hint that Jesus, until the seventh century AD, was worshipped in

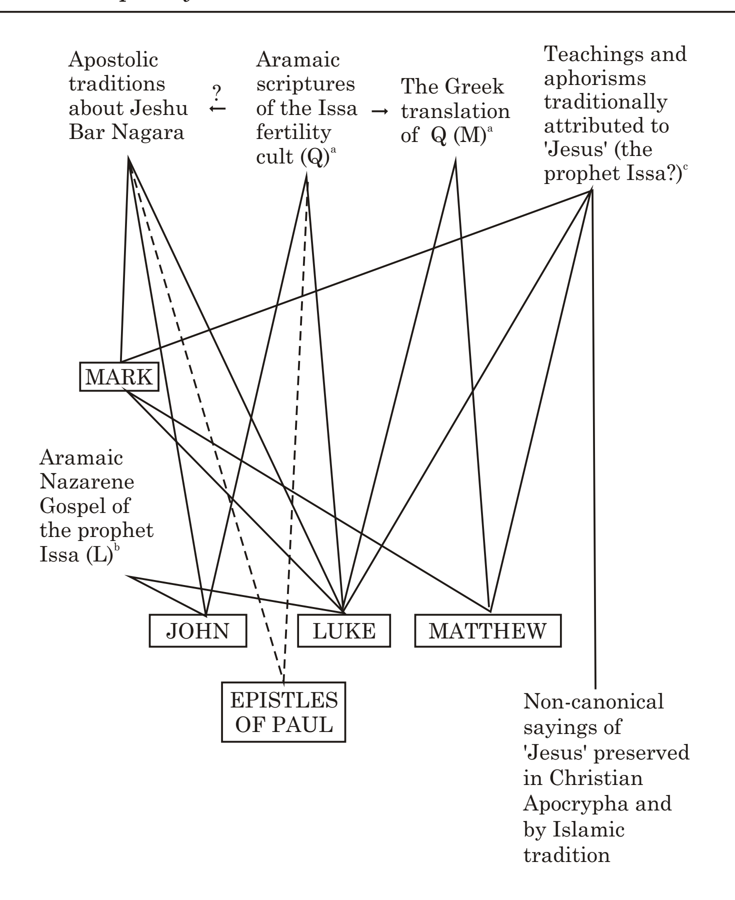


Figure 4 *Proposed documentary theory of the New Testament as a whole*

Notes

[a] Includes original materials of Matthew's Christmas story.

[b] Also the source of Luke's Christmas story.

[c] Called in Christian tradition the *Logia*.

Arabia as a god, or revered as the 'Son of God', whereas he was historically no more than a prophet to Israel, albeit a pre-eminent one. That there was some old Nazarene heresy among the Israelites of Arabia which confused the historical identity of Jesus the prophet and the mythological person of a

fertility god by the same name (in both cases Issa) is not unlikely. Perhaps the Nazarene Way of the Jerusalem apostles was the survival of such an eclectic heresy. Apart from making a great issue of its crucified leader being Messiah, or Christ, whose coming was prophesied by the Old Testament prophets, the apostles of the Nazarene Way also spoke of his resurrection from the dead – one of the fundamental mythological concepts of the Arabian Jesus cult. Perhaps they had a belief in the transmigration of souls, on the basis of which they identified their leader in apotheosis on the one hand with Issa the prophet, and on the other hand with Issa the god, long before Paul appeared on the scene to produce his more refined Jesus theory. Such confusions between canonical monotheism, Messianical prophecy, mythological lore and esoteric gnosticism are not unknown historically. They are attested, for example, in a number of Islamic sects and Sufi 'Ways' (Arabic singular *tariqah)* which orthodox Islam condemned as reprehensible heresies at different times.

Apparently seduced by the concept of the resurrected Christ that was central to this heresy and having gone to Arabia to trace its origins, Paul spotted its component elements in two sets of scriptures he discovered there: the Nazarene Gospel of Jesus the prophet; and the mythology of Jesus the fertility god. Having no special use for the Nazarene Gospel, he simply ignored it, leaving it to be used after his death by Luke and John. What fascinated him was the rich and highly meaningful recorded lore concerning the Jesus who was a god and also the son of god, capable of assuming human form to die as men do, yet rise from the dead. By a highly sophisticated use of this lore, he succeeded in transforming the primitive heresy of the Nazarene Way into a great faith whose central figure, Jesus Christ, was identified as Jeshu Bar Nagara - the leader of the Nazarene apostles who had died on the cross in Jerusalem and, so his followers claimed, had risen from the dead in the manner mythologically attributed to the god Jesus. Is this the way Christianity began? And if so, can we still consider it a valid faith for its followers in the modern world?

As I ask these questions, I hear the resounding answer from

Handel's Messiah, played over the radio to celebrate the coming of Christmas:

> The kingdoms of this world are become the
> Kingdom of the Lord and of his Christ, and
> he shall reign for ever and ever!

11 The ‘Bethany’ Mysteries

WE now have enough background information to attempt a proper investigation of the Lazarus story (see chapter 9) which, like the 'I am' statements, is one of the exclusive features of the Gospel of John. For this purpose, we will need some patience, because such an investigation will require a detailed analysis of the complete text of the story. To begin with, here is the text, as presented by John (10:40 –12:13):

> Jesus . . . went back again across the River Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing, and he stayed there. . .
>
> A man named Lazarus, who lived in Bethany, was ill. Bethany was the town where Mary and her sister Martha lived. (This Mary was the one who poured perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who was ill.)
>
> The sisters sent Jesus a message: 'Lord, your dear friend is ill.' When Jesus heard it, he said, 'The final result of this illness will not be the death of Lazarus . . . it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory.'
>
> Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he received the news that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was for two more days. Then he said to the disciples, 'Let us go back to Judaea.' 'Teacher,' the disciples answered, 'just a short time ago the people there wanted to stone you; and are you planning to go back?' Jesus said, 'A day has twelve hours, hasn't it? So whoever walks in broad daylight does not stumble . . .' Jesus said this and then added, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him up.' The disciples answered, 'If he is asleep, Lord, he will get well' . . . So Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead . . . Let us go to him.' Thomas . . . said to his

fellow-disciples, 'Let us all go with the Teacher, so that we may die with him!'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been buried four days before. Bethany was less than three kilometres from Jerusalem, and many Judaeans had come to see Martha and Mary to comfort them over their brother's death.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus, 'If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died . . .' 'Your brother will rise to life,' Jesus told her. 'I know,' she replied, 'that he will rise to life on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life . . . Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord!' she answered, 'I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'

After Martha said this, she went back and called her sister Mary privately. 'The Teacher is here,' she told her, 'and is asking for you.' When Mary heard this, she got up and hurried out to meet him. (Jesus had not yet arrived in the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him). . . as soon as she saw him, she fell at his feet. 'Lord', she said, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died!'. . . Jesus wept. 'See how much he loved him!' the people said . . .

Jesus went to the tomb, which was a cave with a stone placed at the entrance. 'Take the stone away!' Jesus ordered. Martha, the dead man's sister, answered, 'There will be a bad smell, Lord. He has been buried four days!'. . . They took the stone away . . . Jesus . . . called out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' He came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave clothes, and with a cloth round his face. 'Untie him,' Jesus told them, 'and let him go.'

Many of the people who had come to visit Mary saw what Jesus did, and they believed in him. But some of them returned to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the Pharisees and the chief priests met with the Council and said, 'What shall we do? . . . If we let him go on in this way, everyone will believe in him . . .' From that day on the Jewish authorities made plans to kill Jesus. So Jesus did not travel openly in Judaea, but left and went to a place near the desert. . . where he stayed with the disciples.

The time for the Passover Festival was near, and many

people went up from the country to Jerusalem to perform the ritual purification before the festival . . . Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, the man he had raised from death. They prepared a dinner for him there, which Martha helped to serve; Lazarus was one of those who were sitting at the table with Jesus. Then Mary took half a litre of a very expensive perfume made of pure nard, poured it on Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair . . . A large number of people heard that Jesus was in Bethany, so they went there, not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from death. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus too, because on his account many Jews were rejecting them and believing in Jesus.

The next day the large crowd that had come to the Passover Festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm-trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the King of Israel!'

The critical study of New Testament texts has long recognized this account as being a composite one: a fusion of different strains of narrative, so replete with interpolation that the sutures between the various parts can be easily detected, far more readily in the original Greek than in the translations.

There is good reason to strip the text of the episode recounting the anointment of Jesus at the dinner allegedly hosted by Lazarus. Mark and Matthew on the one hand, and Luke on the other, give different reports of the event, and it appears that the host at the dinner of the anointment was called Simon, not Lazarus. Mark and Matthew, like John, say that the dinner was held in Bethany shortly before Jesus entered Jerusalem; Luke, however, speaks of the same dinner among the events of the period when Jesus (i.e. Bar Nagara) was in Galilee, before his final departure to Judea, and does not specify where it was held. Moreover, in relating the story of the dinner, only John calls the woman who did the anointing Mary, identifying her as the sister of Martha and of Lazarus. The three other Gospels leave the same woman unnamed, Luke depicted her as a penitent harlot (see chapter 9). This

means that the manner in which John relates the dinner of the anointment to the story of Lazarus is at the very least uncertain.

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we may assume that the Jesus who was anointed with expensive perfume at some dinner held in his honour was the historical Jeshu Bar Nagara, regardless of where or when the dinner was held and who was present.

The manner in which John introduces Martha and Mary into his narrative in two successive interpolations – first as residents of Bethany; then as the 'sisters' of Lazarus – is highly suspicious. This much, again, has already been observed (chapter 9). In Luke, the only other Gospel which speaks of Martha and Mary, the two women are not depicted as residents of Bethany. Luke does not indicate that they had a brother called Lazarus, nor does he say that Jesus 'loved' them. In fact, the story he relates about them implies, first, that they lived in Galilee, not in Judea, considering that the account of their reception of Jeshu Bar Nagara is related among the Galilean events of Bar Nagara's career; second, that the two women were independent spinster sisters living by themselves, Martha (presumably the older of the two) being the mistress of the house; third, that Bar Nagara visited them by chance when he happened to pass through their village or town (Greek *kome*) (Luke 10:38–42):

> Jesus . . . came to a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him in her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat down at the feet of the Lord and listened to his teaching. Martha was upset over all the work she had to do, so she came and said, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!' The Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha! You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed. Mary has chosen the right thing, and it will not be taken away from her.'

Possibly, the story of the raising of Lazarus in Bethany was not originally told about the historical Jesus who was Jeshu Bar Nagara; but there must have been 'sisters' who featured in the original version of the Lazarus story. When John

undertook to relate this story to the career of Bar Nagara, he identified the 'sisters' of Lazarus as being Martha and Mary – the two unmarried Galilean ladies who had once received the historical Bar Nagara in their home. Stripped of the dialogue regarding the death of their 'brother', the episode featuring the two ladies in John's developed version of the Lazarus story is reduced to the account of a chance visit, fully compatible with the account of the same visit by Luke (excerpted from John 11:20–9, with the introduction and the continuation from Luke added in italics, to indicate the natural fit between the two narratives):

> *Jesus . . . came to a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him in her home. She had a sister named Mary . . .* When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house . . . 'Yes, Lord!.' [Martha said to Jesus] 'I do believe that you are the Messiah...'
>
> After Martha said this, she went back and called her sister Mary privately. 'The Teacher is here,' she told her, 'and is asking for you.' When Mary heard this she got up and hurried out to meet him. *Mary . . . sat down at the feet of the Lord and listened to his teaching. . .*

Stripping the text under consideration first from the episode of the anointment, then of all the parts relating to Martha and Mary, we discover that what remains of the narrative is still a composite story recounting two different sets of events. These are readily distinguishable from one another first, by the geographical setting; second, by the characters involved. On the one hand, we have an account of Jesus (in this case, definitely the historical Bar Nagara) leading his disciples from a place 'across the Jordan river' to Judea (not specifically to Bethany) to make his final entry into Jerusalem, where he is received by a welcoming throng; while the local Jewish authorities plot against him, because they are jealous of his growing popularity. On the other hand, we have the story of the Jesus (not necessarily Bar Nagara) who goes to Bethany and raises a 'dear friend' called Lazarus from death in the presence of some of the local people. If we go

back to read the text at this point, we are struck by the fact that the disciples vanish from the scene from the very moment that Jesus reportedly arrives outside Bethany: no reference to them is made when the story of the raising of Lazarus is related. Thus, in one case, we have a perfectly credible account of the movements of Jeshu Bar Nagara and his disciples during the last weeks of his career. In the second, we have a miracle story in which the disciples do not feature in any way. The first account, isolated from the second, makes complete sense by itself:

> Jesus . . . went back again across the River Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing, and he stayed there ... for two more days. Then he said to the disciples, 'Let us go back to Judaea.' 'Teacher,' the disciples answered, 'just a short time ago the people there wanted to stone you; and are you planning to go back?' Jesus said, 'A day has twelve hours, doesn't it? So whoever walks in broad daylight does not stumble . . .' Thomas . . . said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us all go along with the Teacher, so that we may die with him!'. . .
>
> The Pharisees and the chief priests met with the Council and said, 'What shall we do? ... If we let him go on in this way, everyone will believe him . . .' From that day on the Jewish authorities made plans to kill Jesus. So Jesus did not travel openly in Judaea, but left and went to a place near the desert . . . where he stayed with the disciples. The time for the Passover Festival was near . . .
>
> Six days before the Passover . . . They prepared a dinner for him there . . . The next day the large crowd that had come to the Passover Festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm-trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the King of Israel!'

Had there been any tradition which spoke of Jeshu Bar Nagara performing the supreme miracle of raising a man from the dead shortly before his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, it is difficult to imagine that the Synoptic Gospels, whose texts are replete with the accounts of other miracles, would not have mentioned this special one. The plain fact is

that none of them do, which indicates that no such tradition existed. Nor do the Gospels anywhere mention a 'dear friend' especially 'loved' by Bar Nagara who was called Lazarus. The suspicion becomes even stronger: the Lazarus story did not originally relate to traditions concerning the historical career of the Jesus who was Jeshu Bar Nagara. John picked up the story from some other source concerning another Jesus to fuse it into his composite account of Bar Nagara's career. For this purpose, he had to do the following.

First, he made Bar Nagara stop in Bethany – which he describes in a special interpolation as a town or village 'less than three kilometres from Jerusalem' (11:18) – to perform the miracle shortly before his entry into the holy city.

Second, he identified the 'sisters' of Lazarus as being the Martha and Mary whom Bar Nagara had once visited in their home (see above). For this purpose, he had to introduce a dialogue between the two sisters and Bar Nagara regarding the death of their 'brother'.

Third, he transformed the resurrected Lazarus into the host at the dinner where some woman anointed Bar Nagara with perfume, identifying this woman as Martha's sister Mary. In the tradition of Martha and Mary, as related by Luke, Martha 'welcomed' Bar Nagara to her home and dutifully attended to his entertainment, while her sister Mary 'sat down at the feet of the Lord and listened to his teaching'. In John's version of the story of the anointment of Bar Nagara, Martha is again the dutiful lady of the house who 'helps serve' the dinner, while her sister Mary reappears at the 'feet' of Bar Nagara, this time to pour a pint of perfume on them. According to Mark and Matthew, Bar Nagara was anointed on the 'head', as the kings of Israel were anointed (see chapter 9).

Fourth, John made a point of depicting the raising of Lazarus as the ultimate miracle which turned the masses of the people away from the Pharisees and chief priests to follow Bar Nagara. According to John, and John alone, it was in direct consequence of this miracle that the Jewish authorities finally decided that Bar Nagara must be killed, along with the resurrected Lazarus, for with the account of this event increasing numbers of people were rejecting their priestly leadership and turning to follow Bar Nagara instead.

Isolating the story of the raising of Lazarus from the historical context into which it is artificially placed in the text of John, and from everything else legitimately pertaining to the historical Bar Nagara, we find its narrative coherence enhanced rather than diminished:

> A man named Lazarus, who lived in Bethany, was ill . . . The sisters sent Jesus a message: 'Lord, your dear friend is ill.' When Jesus heard it, he said: 'The final result of this illness will not be the Heath of Lazarus . . . it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory . . . Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him up.'
> When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been buried four days before . . . Jesus said . . . T am the resurrection and the life ... Do you believe this?'. . . Jesus went to the tomb . . . he called out in a loud voice: 'Lazarus, come out!' He came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave clothes, and with a cloth round his face. 'Untie him,' Jesus told them, 'and let him go.'

The Jesus of this story, identifying himself as the 'Son of God', and boldly proclaiming himself to be 'the resurrection and the life', was not the historical Bar Nagara; nor was he the prophet Issa of the Nazarene Gospel and the Koran. He was the mythological Al Issa of the 'I am' statements: the ancient Arabian god of the miraculous semen, or *'ays* – the 'life-giving water' which was the ultimate source of virility, guaranteeing eternal life for mankind by the continuity of procreation through the male seed. The story of Lazarus must have been part of this mythology. We have now managed to isolate this story from the artificial context into which it was placed by John. With the textual analysis with which we began our inquiry essentially completed, we can now turn to examine the internal content of the myth.

John describes Lazarus as 'a man who lived in Bethany'. As a figure in a myth, this Lazarus need not have been a man. Throughout the story which revolves around him, even with the elaborations added by John, he remains strangely silent and inactive, never really coming to life. When he is reportedly raised from death, he is simply 'untied' and left to

'go', as if he did not belong to the human environment of his native Bethany. At the dinner allegedly held in his house after his miraculous resurrection, it is an anonymous 'they' who are in charge of the dinner. Rather than personally attending to his guests, as a host is expected to do, Lazarus is merely 'one of those who were sitting at the table with Jesus', without reportedly uttering a word. Moreover, as a 'dear friend' of Jesus who allegedly owed him his very life, Lazarus of Bethany fails to reappear among the followers of the Lord during the crucial week that followed, and nothing more is heard about him. Could Lazarus have been an idol?

Before we can determine what Lazarus actually was, we must examine his name, which is rendered in Greek as *Lazaros* (without the masculine suffix *Lazar).* Scholars have recognized this name, correctly, as being identical with *Eliezer* – from the accepted pronunciation of a name which features in the Old Testament in consonantal spelling as *'ly'zr* (a construct of *'I,* meaning 'god', and *'zr* or *y'zr).* In Thamudic (see chapter 10) and other ancient Arabian inscriptions discovered in the northern Hijaz, the identical name is cited in Arabicized form as *'Adhr El* or *Yu'dhir El* (arbitrary vocalization of what is consonantally rendered in the original as *'dr 'I* and *y'dr 'I),* with the order of the component parts of the construct reversed. This indicates to us what the name 'Lazarus' actually meant. In Arabic, the root *'dr,* as an equivalent of the Hebrew *'zr,* denotes 'sexual abstinence', or 'virginity'. The *Lazaros* of the New Testament, the equivalent of the *Eliezer* of the Old Testament, and also of the *'Adhr El* and *Yu'dhir El* of the West Arabian inscriptions, meant, essentially, the 'God of Virginity'.

In the ancient cultures of the Near East, children were frequently named after gods. Thus, in the Arabian inscriptions, *A'dhr El* and *Yu'dhir El* feature as personal names. Likewise, the Gospel of Luke speaks of a beggar called Lazarus – a fictional character in one of the parables (16:20–7). The fact remains, however, that the name in question, etymologically, does indicate the existence of an ancient religious cult whose central figure was a god of *'ezer,* or *'adhr,* denoting male virginity. Considering that the Arabic root *'adhr,* apart from meaning 'virginity', also denotes

'circumcision', it appears that the cult of the god of virginity involved a special circumcision rite to prepare young men for marriage, on the grounds that the sexual potency of the male could only be properly unleashed by the removal of the symbolically inhibitive foreskin (for more detail on this matter, see my earlier work *Secrets of the Bible People).*

If the Lazarus allegedly raised by 'Jesus' from the dead was indeed the virginity god Al 'Adhr, as we are permitting ourselves to suppose, then some ancient association is likely to have existed between his cult and that of Al Issa, the god of the life-giving *'rvs,* or 'water of the male'. Evidence to this effect can be discovered on the map of Western Arabia in the Bani Zayd neighbourhood of the hill country of Rijal Alma', on the maritime slopes of Asir, west of the city of Abha. Here, standing close to one another, are two villages which still carry, distinctly, the names of these two gods. One is the 'Lazarus' village of al-'Adhra; the other is the 'Jesus' village called al-'Ays bin Hamad, its name meaning, precisely, 'the semen, son of the comforter (Greek *parakletos*).

The evidence, however, does not stop there. In the Gospel myth of which he is the central character, Lazarus is raised from death in a 'town' or 'village' (*kome*) called Bethany. According to John, this place was located less than three kilometres from Jerusalem. There is actually a Palestinian 'Bethany (the village called Bituniya) which still stands near the town of Ramallah, but this village is located approximately twelve kilometres north of Jerusalem. Since the fourth century AD, another village in the immediate vicinity of this city, called today al-'Azariyyah (after the standard Arabic rendering of the Greek *Lazaros),* has been traditionally identified as being the 'Bethany' of the Gospels, and Christian pilgrims are still taken to visit the 'tomb of Lazarus' in this place. There is not the least indication, however, that the present al-'Azariyyah was ever called 'Bethany'.

In the Greek of the New Testament, 'Bethany' is rendered as *Bethania.* The place-name, in its Greek form, is recognized to be the transliteration of an Aramaic *Beth 'Anya,* hitherto taken to mean 'House of the Echo', the term *'anya* in the construct being interpreted as the verbal noun of the Aramaic root *'na,* 'answer, respond, echo'. The same root, however, in

Aramaic as in Hebrew and Arabic, has a wide variety of other connotations. A derivative from it, for example, is the Aramaic verb *'anwi* (pronounced *'ani*), meaning 'to make ascetic'; hence the noun *'anwaya* to denote an 'ascetic', or a 'hermit' (cf. the Arabic verb *'ana,* in the sense of 'imprison'; hence the noun *'ani,* meaning 'prisoner').* Thus, rather than meaning 'House of the Echo', the Aramaic *Beth 'Anya* could have indicated a 'House of Asceticism', i.e. a place of monastic retirement such as a hermitage or a cloister. In this case, the 'sisters' featuring in the Lazarus myth would have been a monastic community of women serving the virginity god 'Adhr El, or El 'Adhr (hence *Lazaros*), in a 'cloister' or 'hermitage' where a special shrine or temple was consecrated for his worship.

As a place-name, 'Bethany', as the *Beth* or 'House' of *'Anya,* features on the map of West Arabia in Arabicized form as *al-'An* or *al-'Aniyah.* A number of villages carry this name in different parts of the area. Significantly, one such village, called *al-'Aniyah,* is located in the same hill country of Rijal Alma' as the 'Lazarus' village of al-'Adhra, and the 'Jesus' village of al-'Ays bin Hamad, whose existence we have already noted. Such a conjunction of place-names cannot be pure coincidence.

Accordingly, we may consider the Arabian 'Bethany' which is today the al-'Aniyah of Rijal Alma' to have been the original geographical setting of the Lazarus story, as related by John. Also, we may regard this story as being originally a myth – part of the rich Arabian lore concerning the 'Jesus' who was actually the fertility god AI Issa. Furthermore, we may permit ourselves to suggest a reconstruction of this particular myth as follows.

Al Issa, as the ultimate source of the virile 'life-giving water', had an associate in divinity: a secondary deity called Al 'Adhr, who was a god of male virginity. The function of his god was not to keep men permanently celibate, but to see to it that they properly maintained their virginity until the

* The same verbal root, in Aramaic, is attested in the sense of 'be continent; as well as 'have intercourse', so that the noun from it can mean both 'sexual continence' and 'intercourse'. The Aramaic for 'make ascetic' is a derivative from the root in the first sense.

time came for them to marry, whereupon their foreskins were removed by ritual circumcision to unleash their sexual potency. Until very recently, young men continued to be circumcised in public, in the presence of their prospective brides, in the same hill country of Rijal Alam' where Al 'Adhr appears to have had one of his principal shrines. The Greek geographer Strabo, speaking of Arabia in the first century AD, made a point of noting that the men of this particular West Arabian region 'deprive themselves of the prepuce'.

One day, the 'sisters' in charge of a shrine or temple devoted to the worship of Al 'Adhr discover that this god has lost his power to make his male devotees sexually potent; in fact, that he was himself losing his potency. So they send a message to Al Issa announcing to him that his 'dear friend' is sick. Al Issa is certain that the 'sickness' of Al 'Adhr will not end with his death; he assumes that his 'friend' is 'asleep', and only needs to be 'woken up'. Thereupon, he goes to 'Bethany' to find Al 'Adhr 'tied up'* in grave clothes and actually lying dead in his tomb.

Al Issa goes to the tomb and calls out in a loud voice: 'Lazarus, come out!' At this call, Al 'Adhr is immediately restored to life; but his 'hands', 'feet' and 'face' are still 'wrapped' in grave cloths. Al Issa thereupon issues orders that he be 'untied' and left to 'go'. Thus, the potency of Al 'Adhr is miraculously restored, and the superior *mishbah,* or 'glory' (see chapter 10) of Al Issa as the ultimate source of life-giving virility is established.

Possibly, this myth telescopes the memory of an original conflict between two rival fertility cults in the West Arabian region where it is geographically set: one, the cult of Al Issa, the god of 'life-giving water'; the other, the cult of Al 'Adhr, the god of 'virginity' who prepares young men for marriage through 'circumcision' (the two different connotations of his name). Ultimately, the first cult, which was the stronger one, triumphed over the second. But instead of being obliterated the cult of Al 'Adhr was transformed into a local subsidiary of

* In idiomatic Arabic, sexual impotence, particularly in the case of an inexperienced bridegroom, is spoken of as a 'tie' or 'knot' (Arabic *'uqdah).* To 'untie' (Arabic *halla)* the *'uqdah* is to break the evil spell to which impotence is attributed by folk tradition.

the cult of Al Issa, in which the two gods came to be jointly worshipped as associates though not equals in divinity. This may explain the enigmatic statement attributed to Al Issa when he is told that Al 'Adhr is sick:

> The final result of this sickness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory.

Ultimately, however, the worship of Al 'Adhr as an associate of Al Issa was dropped. Depotentized, the former god of virginity became an ordinary man who was no more than a 'dear friend' to Al Issa. Yet a special place continued to be reserved for him in the Al Issa cult. In one of the mysteries of this cult, he remained the specially 'beloved' of the god of 'the resurrection and the life' who died and was miraculously raised from the dead.

So much for the story of Lazarus. But we must stop here to give the question of Bethany closer consideration. The name, as already observed, denotes a 'hermitage', or 'cloister': a place of religious retreat. Moreover, while no place actually called Bethany survives in the vicinity of the Palestinian Jerusalem, there are at least two called al-'Aniyah in Arabia: one of them the 'Aniyah of Rijal Alma', of which we have just spoken; the other an 'Aniyah some distance further north along the maritime slopes of the West Arabian highlands of Asir. So far, we have reckoned that the first 'Aniyah was the Bethany of the Gospel of John, which was the setting of the Lazarus myth. Was the Bethany of the Synoptic Gospels the same place; or did it refer to the other 'Aniyah, which was again West Arabian rather than Palestinian? In Mark (11:1), a 'Bethany' is spoken of in conjunction with two other places: the 'Mount of Olives' (Greek *to oros ton elaiori),* and a town or a village called Bethphage (which is the exact spelling of the name in the Greek Gospel). Matthew (21:1) speaks of the 'Mount of Olives' and of Bethphage in the same context as Mark does, but does not mention a 'Bethany' of the same vicinity, although he does seem to place his 'Bethany' in the same general area (21:17). Luke (19:29) agrees that Bethany and Bethphage were actually neighbouring towns or

villages. Rather than associating them, however, with a 'Mount of Olives', he speaks of them as being located 'at the mount that is called *Elaion' (to oros to chaloumenon elaion,* also in Luke 21:37; but *apo orous tou chaloumenou elaionos* in Acts 1:12). This is strange, because Luke did speak elsewhere of the 'Mount of Olives' (19:37; 22:39) rather than of the 'mount that is called *Elaion'*. Mark (13:3; 14:26) and Matthew (24:3; 26:30) only speak of the 'Mount of Olives'; never of *Elaion*. John, for his part, speaks of neither place. The only verse of his Gospel ( ) which mentions the 'Mount of Olives' (not *Elaion*) occurs in a passage which is generally considered a later interpolation (7:53–8:11), because it does not feature in the oldest authoritative texts.

Elaion, rendered in the older English translations as 'Olivet', has been considered no more than a variant of the name for the 'Mount of Olives', traditionally identified with the present olive grove on one of the hillsides east of the Palestinian Jerusalem. As a Greek word, *elaion* does in fact mean 'olive grove'. For this reason, most modern translations, unlike the AV and RSV, do not follow the Greek of Luke and Acts in making the distinction between the 'Mount of Olives' and 'Olivet'. Critics of the Gospel texts, however, have long noted the difference in connotation between the two names, as they are rendered in the original Greek. In *to oros ton elaion,* they observe, the form of the article *ton* shows that the word *elaion* that follows is genitive plural, meaning 'of olives'. On the other hand, in *to oros to chaloumenon elaion,* the name is treated as a sound, written as a nominative singular, and not declined; and the same applies to the *Elaionos* in Acts 1:12, which is the identical name to which the Greek suffix indicating the masculine nominative is further attached.

The word is definitely a place-name, possibly but not necessarily relating to 'olives' or to an 'olive grove'. Perhaps *Elaion,* as the place-name in question, is not the Greek word for 'olives', but the transliteration of a Semitic original: the Biblical *'elyon,* meaning the 'exalted', 'lofty', or 'most high', of which the Arabicized equivalent would be *'alyan*. Luke, who could read Aramaic, must have taken this name from the original Aramaic of his Q source (see chapter 10), and transliterated it correctly as *Elaion,* where his Q source

actually indicated this particular place. Matthew, who could not handle Aramaic, used the same Q source in a Greek translation, where he read *elaion* as a Greek term meaning 'olives'. Mark, who did not use the Q source, relied on traditions which associated places called 'Bethany' and 'Bethphage' with a place called the 'Mount of Olives'; and both Matthew and Luke ralied on him for these particular traditions, in addition to having access to the Greek or Aramaic of the Q source. And the Q source, as we already more than suspect, did not speak of the Jesus who was Jeshu Bar Nagara; nor the one who was the post-exilic Israelite prophet Issa; but of the Jesus who was Al Issa, the Arabian fertility god.

Not being highly perceptive in the use of his sources, Luke was actually confused between the 'Mount of Olives' and *Elaion,* or 'Olivet'. From 2 Samuel 15:30, it is clear that a ridge outside the Old Testament Jerusalem (to my mind, the original, Arabian Jerusalem) was called *har ha-zeytim:* literally, the 'mountain of olives'. The Hebrew text there specifies the 'ascent' (15:30) and the 'summit' (15:32) of this *har ha-zeytim.* This suggests a mountain ridge, such as the countless ones found in the Asir highlands, more prominent than the hill traditionally identified as the 'Mount of Olives' outside the Palestinian Jerusalem, whose peak is barely 30 metres higher than the highest point in the city itself. In the oracles of the prophet Zechariah (14:4), the same *har ha-zeytim* features in a vision of the end of days, when the feet of the Lord shall 'stand on the Mount of Olives'. Here again, a ridge of more formidable proportions than the Palestinian 'Mount of Olives' seems to be indicated:

> On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward.

In putting together their story of their Jesus and presenting him as the legitimate Israelite Messiah of Hebrew scriptural promise, the Synoptic Gospels depended in many instances on

the prophecies of Zechariah; and New Testament scholars have long noted that the 'Mount of Olives' *(to oros ton elaion),* as it features in the Gospel texts, is a 'Synoptic term', not occurring in John. The place features in these Gospels exclusively in the parts relating to the final arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem, and the passion week that followed: the final 'coming of the Lord' to his holy city. Hence, the historicity of the Gospel references to it – even in Luke – may be safely discounted, much as all other Gospel passages harking back to Old Testament prophecy (see chapter 3).

In Acts 1:12, Luke identifies his *Elaion,* or 'Olivet', with Zechariah's 'Mount of Olives' for the same purpose, by indicating that this *Elaion* was located in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem. This, however, he does not do elsewhere, where he simply speaks of the mountain by this name (Semitic *'Elyon,* or *'Alyan,* see above) as belonging to the same vicinity as 'Bethany' and 'Bethphage'.

In Aramaic, the name 'Bethphage' would be *Beth Faga:* literally the 'House of the Fig' (Aramaic *faga,* Arabic *al-fajj).* The only possible 'Bethphage' in Palestine is the coastal village of al-Fajjah, north-east of Jaffa, and at a considerable distance from the Palestinian Jerusalem. Even if we were to concede to the traditional identification of 'Bethany' and the 'Mount of Olives' (or 'Mount Olivet') being in Palestine, with the present village of al-'Azariyyah, and the existing olive grove between this village and Jerusalem, we would be left with the outstanding problem of 'Bethphage'. In short, all things considered, the interpretation of the New Testament geography in terms of the geography of Palestine, where the 'Bethany' of the. Synoptic Gospels and its neighbourhood are concerned, is impossible.

In the region of Rijal Alma', in Western Arabia, we find no *Elaion* or 'Bethphage' in the vicinity of the Local 'Bethany', or 'Aniyah, which appears to have been the setting of the Lazarus myth. In relating the story of the raising of Lazarus, John nowhere suggests that there were actually places by these names in the vicinity of the 'Bethany' where the events of his story unfolded. Turning northwards from Rijal Alma', however, we do find a 'Bethphage' (the *Beth,* or 'House, of *Faga)* called today al-Fajah, near the other West Arabian

'Bethany' called al-'Aniyah. The two villages in question, both located on the maritime slopes of the Asir highlands, lie at the foot of the rocky crags of the great West Arabian escarpment. Overlooking them from a promontory of the dizzy heights of the same escarpment is the village called today Al 'Alyan – the name of Luke's hitherto enigmatic *Elaion*.

As we scrutinize the texts of the Synoptic Gospels, we find reason to suspect that the 'Bethany' (al-'Aniyah) and the 'Bethphage' (al-Fajah) located at the foot of this West Arabian *Elaion* (Al 'Alyan) once provided the geographical setting for a myth relating to yet another ancient West Arabian fertility cult: that of a 'Fig God' or 'Fig Goddess' called, in Aramaic, *Faga*. As a tree, the fig is not only prolific in highly nutritious fruit, but also exhibits a remarkable capacity to resist drought and flourish indefinitely in sparse soil – even in rock fissures – without human attention and care. What better symbol could there be of miraculous fertility? In 'Bethphage', there may have been a special *Beth* – a 'House', meaning 'Temple' – where a local 'Fig' deity was worshipped, with a special 'Bethany' as a 'hermitage' or 'cloister' for religious retreat nearby. It was probably relating to this 'Fig' deity – not of the fig as an ordinary tree – that the Gospels tell the following story (Matthew 21:17–19; cf. Mark 11:12–14, 20):

> Jesus. . . went out of the city to Bethany . . . On his way . . . Jesus was hungry. He saw a fig-tree by the side of the road went to it, but he found nothing on it except leaves. So he said to the tree, 'You will never again bear fruit!' At once the fig-tree dried up.

As in the case of the Lazarus story, there is more to the story of 'Jesus' cursing the 'fig tree' than is immediately apparent. This may be another piece of ancient West Arabian mythology concerning the supreme fertility god Al Issa, as he sets out to overwhelm or destroy the cults of rival fertility deities– in this case, the one of the miraculous Fig

At this juncture, we should stop to ask ourselves: are we still proceeding rationally and soberly with our investigation of the Jesus question, or are we beginning to stray into the realm of fantasy? On the surface, our special interpretations.

of the two 'Bethany' stories – the one concerning the raising of Lazarus, and the one about the cursing of the fruitless fig tree – have much in them which may seem highly fanciful. Yet the fact remains that the Lazarus story, as related by John, involves beyond doubt a fusion between different strains of narrative. There are also other facts to take into account: for example, that there are Arabian inscriptions which speak of a 'Jesus' god called *'s,* and which render the name of 'Lazarus' in Arabicized form as 'Adhr El or Yu'dhir El; also, that there are clusters of villages in two different corners of West Arabia which perpetuate the names of the different characters and locations cited in connection with the two different Gospel stories under consideration. Moreover, the fact that Luke, who was knowledgeable in Aramaic, spoke of the 'mountain' near the Bethany and Bethphage of the 'fig' story as being called *Elaion,* not the 'Mount of Olives', is not a matter easily dismissed.

12 The Treason of Judas

JESHU Bar Nagara did not have to be betrayed by one of his own disciples for his life to end on the cross. He had made a conspicuous entry into Jerusalem: with a whip in his hand, he had openly led a riot in the precincts of the Temple, and then used the same precincts as his public platform – a fact to which all four Gospels attest.

The high priests could immediately have had him seized and brought before them for questioning about his Messianic pretensions and unruly behaviour. There was no need to track him down because he was not living in hiding. On the night of his arrest, he was enjoying a leisurely supper with his disciples, after which the party went to a 'garden' outside the city to which everybody had access. When the men sent by the high priests arrived to arrest him, it is reported that Jeshu was surprised to find them armed (Mark 14:48–9; cf. Luke 22:52–3; Matthew 26:55):

> Did you have to come with swords and clubs to capture me, as though I were an outlaw? Day after day I was with you teaching in the Temple, and you did not arrest me.

All four Gospels, however, insist that Jeshu was betrayed, and repeatedly name his betrayer as Judas Iscariot – the disciple he trusted enough to make the keeper of his 'money bag'. For such a betrayal to be necessary, the whereabouts of the Master and his disciples on the day of his arrest – more particularly the place where they had the Last Supper – had to be secret. A story was told to suggest – but not explicitly state – that this was the case (Mark 14:12–15):

> On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the day the lambs for the Passover meal were killed, Jesus' disciples asked him, 'Where do you want us to go and get the Passover meal ready for you?' Then Jesus sent two of them with these instructions: 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house he enters, and say to the owner of the house: "the Teacher says, Where is the room where my disciples and I will eat the Passover meal?" Then he will show you a large upstairs room, prepared and furnished, where you will get everything ready for us.'

This story about the mysterious man with the 'water jar' leading the two disciples to the secret premises where they prepared the Last Supper first found its way into the Gospel of Mark. Luke, who loved such stories, repeated this one from Mark almost word for word (22:7–12). Matthew, whose Gospel on the whole provides the closest parallel to Mark's, does not appear to have believed the tale. He repeats it, but omits from it the man with the 'water jar'. According to Matthew, the Last Supper was eaten in the house of a friend, or perhaps in a hired apartment (Matthew 26:17–18):

> the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, 'Where do you want us to get the Passover meal ready for you?' 'Go to a certain man in the city,' he said to them, 'and tell him: "The Teacher says . . . my disciples and I will celebrate the Passover at your house." '

John does not say where the Last Supper was prepared and eaten. His account of the event simply says: 'It was now the day before the Passover Festival . . . Jesus and his disciples were at supper' (13:1–2).

Unless one insists that the Gospel of Mark, being the oldest of the four, is the most credible on all counts, which is a commonly held view, the story it relates about the man with the 'water jar' who led the disciples to the mysterious 'upstairs room' where they prepared the Last Supper – a story repeated only by the habitually credulous Luke – must be regarded as apocryphal. Had it been necessary for Bar Nagara and his party to have the Last Supper in a hide–out,

they would not have gone directly after the meal to spend the rest of the evening in a public park.

Chronologically, the first mention of the betrayal of 'the Lord Jesus' occurs in a passing remark by Paul (1 Corinthians 11:3; see chapter 2). The Greek verb used there, and also in all four Gospels, is *paradidomi,* literally 'hand over', rather than *prodidomi,* 'betray'. Paul does not mention any particular person as being responsible for the act, leaving its very nature ambiguous. Perhaps his remark was no more than a reference to the fact that Bar Nagara, following his trial by the Jewish religious authorities, was 'handed over' to the Roman secular arm for execution. It need not have referred to an actual 'betrayal' of the man by one of his own disciples.

In a speech reportedly made by Stephen, the first Nazarene martyr in Jerusalem (Acts 7:52), the betrayal of God's 'righteous Servant' is attributed not to an individual of the man's own party, but to the high priest of the Temple and his council in a direct address: 'Was there any prophet that your ancestors did not persecute? They killed God's messengers, who long ago announced the coming of his righteous Servant. And now *you have betrayed and murdered him.'* The Greek term used here – and only here – with respect to the event is the plural of the Greek *prodotes,* 'betrayer, traitor', from the verb *prodidomi,* 'betray'.

It is only in the Gospels, the earliest of which was written no less than forty or fifty years after the event, that the betrayer of 'Jesus' is identified, and repeatedly so, as none other than his own disciple Judas Iscariot. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Judas arrived with the party sent by the chief priests to seize his master, then went straight to him to identify him for arrest with a kiss (Matthew 26:48–9; Mark 14:445; Luke 22:47–8). John says it was the Master who identified himself to the men arriving to arrest him as 'Jesus of Nazareth', repeating this identification of himself twice to assure them that he was the person they wanted. Judas, according to John, simply guided them to the place and stayed on to watch the arrest (John 18:2–8).

There is also disagreement between the Gospels on another matter. The three Synoptic Gospels say that Judas solicited payment from the high priests of the temple for the betrayal,

Matthew stating that the money paid him was 'thirty silver coins' (26:14–15), while Mark (14:10–11) and Luke (22:3–6) leave the amount unspecified. John does not mention any payment for the alleged betrayal.

According to Matthew (27:3–10), Judas repented his treason after the Master was arrested, returned the money paid him by the chief priests of the Temple, then 'went off and hanged himself. With the returned money, the chief priests bought 'the potter's field', turning it into 'a cemetery for foreigners'. The testimony of Matthew regarding this matter can readily be discounted, because he presents it as an actualization of Old Testament prophecy regarding the Messiah (cf. chapter 3). After reporting the suicide of Judas and what the Temple priests did with the money he had returned to them, Matthew adds a misquotation from the prophet Zechariah (11:12-13), which he wrongly attributes to Jeremiah: 'Then what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true: "they took the thirty silver coins, the amount the people of Israel had agreed to pay for him, and used the money to buy the potter's field . . ." '

Mark and John make no reference to what happened to Judas after he betrayed the Master. Luke also says nothing on the matter in his Gospel. In the book of Acts (1:18–19), however, written by the same Luke, the apostle Peter is reported to have said the following about Judas after the 'betrayal':

> With the money that Judas got for his evil act *he bought a field,* where *he fell to his death;* he burst open and all his bowels spilt out. All the people living in Jerusalem heard about it, and so in their own language [Greek *dialektos,* correctly 'dialect'] they call the field Akeldama, which means 'Field of Blood.'

Peter was reportedly addressing a 'meeting of the believers' in Jerusalem, in Palestine, when he told them this story (Acts 1:12–15). The native language of both the speaker and his audience was Aramaic; and 'Akeldama', as a place-name, is an Aramaic word. Yet, Peter is directly quoted as indicating that the 'Field of Blood' where Judas reportedly fell to his

death was called Akeldama 'in *their own dialect',* not 'in *our own language'.* In Greek, the term for language' is *glossos,* not *dialektos.* To make sense of Peter's statement concerning the meaning of the name 'Akeldama' (Aramaic *haql dama,* written *hql dm',* meaning 'field of the blood'), translators of the New Testament have had to ignore the fact that the Greek *dialektos* actually means 'dialect', and render the term instead as 'language', or 'tongue'. Essentially, there are three possibilities to consider here, and the one that applies can be determined by elimination:

1 Peter originally told the story of how Judas died to a Greek audience, and had to explain to them what the name of Akeldama meant in Greek. In that case, he would have said: 'In their own *language* {*glossos,* not *dialektos*), they called that field Akeldama, which means "Field of Blood".'

2 Peter originally told the story in Aramaic, and simply said that the field where Judas fell to his death was called Akeldama, which his Aramaic-speaking Palestinian audience readily understood to mean 'Field of the Blood'. When the author of the book of Acts translated the story into Greek, he introduced an interpolation in the interest of the Greek reader, to indicate that the Aramaic original of the name 'Field of Blood' was Akeldama. In this case also, the interpolation would have had to say that Akeldama was the name of the place 'in their *language' (glossos),* not 'in their *dialect' (dialektos).*

3 Peter originally told his story in Jerusalem in the Palestinian dialect of Aramaic, as distinct from another dialect of the same language - one with which Peter himself was familiar, while at least some members of his audience were not. In this case, and only in this case, he would have actually said: 'In their *dialect* (not language) they call that field Akeldama'; and his use of the term 'dialect' rather than 'language' would have been rendered correctly into Greek as *dialektos* rather than *glossos.*

As transliterated by the author of the book of Acts into Greek, 'Akeldama' does in fact represent a 'Galilean' dialectical pronunciation of *Haql Dama* which is attested in the Babylonian Talmud ('Erubin 53b) – one in which the pharyngeal

Semitic *h* (a type of hardened aitch normally unpronounceable by people of European speech) was dropped at the beginning of words such as *hmar* (meaning 'donkey') or *helba* (meaning 'fat'), to make them sound, respectively, more like *emar* (meaning 'lamb') and *lebya* (meaning 'lioness'). In the place-name *Akeldama,* as transliterated from the original words of Peter into the Greek of Acts, a point is made to indicate that the initial hardened aitch in the *dialektos* he referred to is dropped. Otherwise, the name could easily have been transliterated into Greek as *Chakeldama,* the Greek letter *chi* being a well-attested transliteration of the Semitic pharyngeal aitch (as, for example, the Septuagint renderings of the Biblical names 'Ham' and 'Hebron', both of which feature this fricative initially, as *Cham* and *Chebron).*

Peter, it must be noted, said that Akeldama was the name of the 'Field of Blood' in 'their dialect'; not 'our dialect'. He was not referring to the dialect of Jerusalem, where he was making his address. Had the field of Akeldama been a place in the Jerusalem vicinity, as has traditionally been supposed, its name would have been pronounced in the Jerusalem dialect of Aramaic (not in 'their dialect') as *Haql Dama,* rendered into Greek as *Chakeldama.* The Akeldama in question was nowhere close to Jerusalem, and the dialect in which the name was so pronounced was not the Jerusalem dialect. It was either the dialect of Simon Peter's original homeland, which was the Arabian rather than Palestinian Galilee; or it was the particular dialect of the community in that same Galilee to which Judas Iscariot originally belonged – the *Iskar* which is today the village called 'Askar (chapter 7). Where the Babylonian Talmud – which was not written in Palestine – refers to the peculiarities of the 'Galilean' dialect, it does not specify that the Galilee in question was the Palestinian one.* One cannot, in short, exclude the possibility

* The Babylonian Talmud, compiled in Iraq during the first six centuries of the Christian era, distinguishes between the 'Judaeans who were exact in their language' and therefore 'retained their learning', and the 'Galileans who were not exact in their language' and consequently 'did not retain their learning'. The term 'Judaeans' here must refer to the Jews of Palestine in general, including those of the Palestinian Galilee, where the town of Tiberias, during the same period, was a leading centre of Jewish religious

that this dialect – so different from the spoken Aramaic of Palestine – was a dialect of the Arabian Galilee, granting that it could have been introduced into the Palestinian Galilee by the successive waves of immigrants arriving from the Hijaz (chapter 8). In Jerusalem, the disciples of Bar Nagara could be immediately recognized as 'Galileans' not only by their accent (Matthew 26:70), but also, it seems, by their distinctly outlandish appearance (Mark 14:70; Luke 22:59). It is difficult to imagine that differences in both dialect and appearance between northerners and southerners in Palestine would have been as glaringly noticeable.

Even is one were to grant the name *Haql Dama,* or 'field' of Dama (literally, 'the blood'), was pronounced *Akl Dama* in the *dialektos* of the Palestinian Galilee, the fact remains that no place called Akeldama or Dama can be found anywhere in Palestine. In the Hijaz, however, there does exist a valley called Dama – a tributary of Wadi Maysan, in the same Taif region where Wadi Jalil (the Arabian Galilee) and the village of *Iskar* (today 'Askar) are located. Considering all this, and assuming that the book of Acts' account of the fate of Judas Iscariot is more or less correct, the facts of the case would have been as follows.

When Bar Nagara was arrested outside Jerusalem, and his frightened followers dispersed, Judas possibly saw no point in remaining in Palestine, so he fled to his native Hijaz, possibly absconding with what remained of the common 'bag' of the disciples. Perhaps he had been among the disciples who had hoped to be accepted as the leader after the Master's death, and having failed in his hopes, returned home to the Hijaz in disappointment, taking the money with him. With the

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learning: the place where much of the Palestinian Talmud was compiled. The same Tiberias, in the same Galilee, was also, at the same time, the centre of the activity of the Palestinian Masoretes who studied and vocalized the text of the Hebrew Bible, as did the Babylonian Masoretes who were their contemporaries in Iraq. Certainly, the 'Galileans' who 'did not retain their learning' because they did not care for their language, and were 'not exact' in its use, were not those of the Palestinian Galilee, but of a non-Palestinian region by the same name - apparently, none other than the 'Galilee' of the Arabian Hijaz, where large Jewish communities continued to flourish until the coming of Islam, without making any attested contributions to Jewish learning in Talmudic and Masoretic times.

inflated prices of Roman Palestine, Judas could not have done much with the little money that was left in that 'bag'. In the Arabian Galilee, however, the amount was sufficient to purchase a large property: a whole 'field' or estate in the local Wadi Dama – the Akeldama referred to by Peter as *Akl Dama* in the native dialectical pronunciation. When the colleagues of Judas, left penniless in Palestine, learnt of what he had done, they denounced him as a traitor to their cause and began to fabricate stories about him. Later, when the news reached them that he had fallen to his death by some accident, they exaggerated the story and circulated it as an example of how traitors are justly punished for their treason.

It is equally possible that Judas had no money left in the 'bag' when he fled to the Hijaz; that he never purchased an estate there; that he did not fall to his death on that same estate; and that the whole story, as allegedly related by Peter, was pure invention. His former colleagues, perhaps, simply imagined that there was still a lot of money left in their common 'bag', which was denied them by his flight: hence the campaign of defamation which they relentlessly waged against him.

As the bursar of the group, Judas may have been unpopular with his colleagues from the very start, as people in his position very often are. The money in his keeping was certainly not sufficient to meet all demands, and his fellow disciples were frequently sent to do their work without any provisions: 'Don't take anything with you on the trip except a walking stick – no bread, no beggar's bag, no money in your pockets. Wear sandals, but don't carry an extra shirt' (Mark 6:8–9). Those were the instructions of the Master, and Judas Iscariot would have been the one to see to it that they were strictly carried out. Bar Nagara probably entrusted Judas with the money knowing him to be naturally parsimonious. Perhaps because he aroused the discontent of the penniless disciples by repeatedly refusing them pressing requests, they picked any opportunity to defame him, charging him with hypocrisy and theft (John 12:3–6):

> Mary took half a litre of a very expensive perfume made of pure nard, poured it on Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her

> hair. The sweet smell of the perfume filled the whole house. One of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot – the one who was going to betray him – said, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?' He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would help himself from it.

As a bursar opposed to waste, Judas Iscariot lcould not easily have been a lovable person. Whether he betrayed his master for money is another matter. The Gospel evidence for it collapses on its own contradictions, and the betrayal, as it is reported, does not really stand to reason. However, there may be more in the Gospel accounts of this betrayal than there appears – perhaps a concept reflecting a special esoterica significance.

In the last stages of our inquiry, we became aware of the close connection between the New Testament concept of the Christ Jesus and the mystery cult of Al Issa, the Arabian god of fertility who was also the 'Redeemer God' Dhu Khalasah. In the mythology of this cult, the god Jesus (as we have called him) dies then returns to life, thereby bringing redemption to all mankind. For the death of a god to be mystically significant, it cannot be natural: the god has to be betrayed and killed by an adversary, normally one of his closest associates. In Egyptian mythology, for instance, it is the god Seth, depicted as the brother or son of Osiris, who treacherously brings about this god's death. This underlines the significance of the mystery of the god's subsequent resurrection as the ultimate triumph of good over evil; of faith over faithlessness; of light over darkness; and of life over death: 'When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised, it will be immortal' (1 Corinthians 15:42).

More likely than not, the mythology of the Arabian god Jesus did attribute his passion and death to a betrayal by one of his closest associates. It would have been only normal for it to do so. As this mythology found its way into the Gospels, to be fused with the story of Jeshu Bar Nagara, the traitor had to be given a name: the name of one of his most trusted

disciples. For this evil role, the perfect candidate was the bursar of the company, Judas Iscariot.

Having already earned the hostility of his colleagues during the Master's lifetime, Judas disappeared after his death, returning to the Hijaz, and leaving the other disciples in Jerusalem to struggle with poverty and misery as they continued with the Master's mission. This was treason enough, and it branded the hated bursar as a heartless cynic, regardless of whether or not he also absconded with what was left of the disciples' common funds. Had Judas stayed on with his colleagues in Jerusalem, he might have redeemed his reputation among them, to become immortalized in Christianity as one of its original saints. But he opted instead for security and the easy life.

Another possibility is that he tried to establish himself as the leader of the disciples, and having failed, left them and returned home, to be followed by their angry invectives. After all, it was merely because they were competitors to Peter for the leadership of the early church in Jerusalem that the Boanerges brothers, James and John – frequently dismissed as 'the sons of Zebedee', without the effort to identify them by name – came to be maligned in the text of the Gospels as the power-greedy sons of a common housemaid (see chapter 9).

But, whatever Judas did, it earned him another kind of immortality: the betrayer of the god of life, who hands him over to the agents of death. With no records available to determine his identity, the original traitor who 'hands over' the Arabian Redeemer god to his murderous adversaries remains unknown. In Christianity, however, this traitor, bearing the full guilt of the mystic 'evil act' of the original mythology, became the historical Judas – the man who held Bar Nagara's coveted 'money bag'.

13 Does It Matter

We have been trying to determine the historical reality of the Jesus question. For this purpose, we went carefully through the Christian scriptures to discover precisely what they say, and what they probably mean; then we made assumptions on the basis of our textual findings, which we put to the test in different ways to estimate the extent to which they may be valid. Throughout the search, we tried as far as possible to remain sober and circumspect, keeping our speculations firmly anchored to our records, and jumping to conclusions only when we felt adequately prepared to do so. Should anyone feel inclined to repeat the experiment along the same lines, there is ample room for this: first, because different people can make different assessments of the same historical subject; second, because we made an economical selection of the materials examined to reach our conclusions, leaving the main body for further consideration.

We were faced with a mystery, and we needed a clue to help unravel it. Our records said different things about different matters, and we could not determine which of them told the truth. To pick up the thread of the truth, we had first to search our records for an obvious lie. This we found by comparing two different scriptural reports concerning the early career of Paul. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul himself asserts that his career as an apostle of Christ started with a trip to Arabia, roundly denying the truth of what other people were saying in his own time about the matter. According to the book of Acts, Paul began his apostolic career with a visit to Jerusalem, which was clearly untrue. What seemed particularly suspicious about this second report was its complete silence about Paul's Arabian venture. Equally suspicious was the fact that Paul only spoke once about his

visit to Arabia, without making the least hint regarding the motive for it.

Having discovered the lie, we had to determine the reason behind it. Also, we had to find out why Paul began his apostolic career by going immediately to Arabia, and not to Jerusalem – a matter which he perhaps deliberately left unexplained. Ultimately, we were concerned not with Paul's trip to Arabia, but with an earlier sequence of events in Palestine culminating in the crucifixion of a man called Jesus in Jerusalem. At this point, we had to make our first assumption: there must have been some secret connection between the Jesus mission and Arabia which the available Christian scriptures are careful not to divulge. With the help of the Koran and certain early Islamic traditions, we were able to satisfy ourselves that this first assumption was reasonable. There was actually an Arabian prophet called Jesus who did not die on the cross, and whose career antedated that of the Palestinian Jesus by about four centuries. This earlier Jesus was called Issa; the later one was called Jeshu. In the Greek of the Christian scriptures, both names equally lend themselves to transliteration as *Iesous,* or Jesus.

From this point, we proceeded to make other assumptions, each of which was put to the test, until it became clear that there were not two, but no less than three Jesuses whose identities are confused and conflated in the Gospels. The third Jesus was an Arabian fertility god called Issa, worshipped also as the 'Redeemer God' Dhu Khalasah, whose cult involved a mystery of death and resurrection. On the basis of the accumulated evidence, we finally advanced a thesis.

The conclusions we arrived at are not, in their essence, entirely new. It is only in the details that they differ from existing theories regarding the Jesus story on which the Christian faith came to be founded. The resemblances between Christianity and the numerous fertility cults of the ancient Near East have long been recognized; it is only the historical connection involved which has eluded detection. Moreover, it is common knowledge today among scholars that the beliefs and practices of the early Nazarenes of Jerusalem were different from those of the Christianity we know, whose

precepts derive for the most part from the teachings of Paul.

At one time, it was commonly thought that Christianity represents a fusion between Semitic religious traditions and Hellenistic thinking. The concept of the 'Word', as elaborated in the Gospel of John, appeared in a special way to reflect a Greek influence: the concept of the *logos* among the Stoic philosophers, standing for ultimate reason. More recently, this view has been undergoing radical reconsideration, even with respect to the John Gospel, and Christianity is coming to be recognized more and more as the product of a Semitic heritage – partly Jewish, partly pagan – which came to be recorded in the common Greek language of the Hellenistic world simply to facilitate its propagation.

Furthermore, today hardly any scholar is prepared to accept the word of the Gospels simply as history without serious question. Among these scholars are ordained clergymen and many others who have not veered in the least from their Christian faith, while questioning the historical authority of the Gospels even to the extent of doubting whether the Jesus of these Gospels ever existed.

Of some of our conclusions, we can be reasonably certain: for example, that there was, historically, an Israelite prophet called Jesus (Issa), and also the cult of an Arabian god by the same name (Al Issa), apart from the historical Jesus (Jeshu) of the Gospels. Others are reasonable deductions based on given information: for example, that Paul, when he visited Arabia, secured copies of local scriptures – some relating to Jesus the prophet; some to Jesus the god – which he and others after him used, in addition to the texts of the Old Testament, to develop the New Testament image of the Gospel Jesus as the eternal Son of God and the living Christ.

Whatever their validity, however, our conclusions do not go any further than the point to which the historical method can take us. Moreover, we must remember that the same method, following the same clues, may possibly lead to different conclusions, because the evidence available for the search is mostly circumstantial rather than definitive, and indirect rather than direct.

The question remains: does the discovery of the historical truth about Jesus in any way invalidate Christianity as a

religion? If the Christian faith is essentially history, it must; but not if it is something else.

As it happens, Christianity is not history, but a religion: a coherent set of convictions relating to matters that lie beyond the limits of empirical induction and logical deduction. Essentially, it involves the concept called 'grace', denned as 'the freely given, unmerited favour and love of God', or the 'condition of being in God's favour'; by corollary, 'the influence or spirit of God operating in man'. The Christian rites called the 'sacraments' (such as baptism, holy communion or ordination), whatever their interpretation by different Christian churches, are essentially regarded as 'visible signs of an inward grace'. To a Christian believer, this grace is guaranteed for mankind by the death of God's Christ on the cross: a transcendental reality before which the realities of history are insignificant. The substance of history, after all, is limited to events. What historian can deny this fact?

Yet history, no less than faith, has to be true to itself within the limits of its field. Its function is not to speculate on the ultimate meaning of human existence, but only to recognize facts for what they are, to the extent that their truth can be determined. Yet, history must not be permitted to overstep its boundaries. Its language, after all, is the conventional one of everyday knowledge; the language of religion, on the other hand, is the language of intuitive vision. Historians may train themselves to learn this special language and gain some grasp of its subtle idiom. If they succeed in this, they will gain an advantage.

Before the emergence of the rational and empirical disciplines which elucidated issues at one level, and sometimes confused them at others, the language of vision was readily understood, and the special meanings it could express were readily grasped. This is still the case among primitive societies today. Through the medium of the language of vision, highly complex ideas can be compressed into disarmingly simple terms to be related as a story – not a historical account, but the sort of lore that is commonly called myth. And myths are only nonsense to those who fail to understand their inner meanings.

In the ancient fertility cults of the Near East, the ultimate

cosmic truth was conceived as a mystery – in many cases, a myth of the human incarnation, death and resurrection of a god whose prime interest was to secure the ultimate good of mankind. In their more primitive forms, these cults presented this ultimate good as biological procreation. In their more evolved forms, this concept was sublimated into something else: a gift of divine 'favour', or 'grace', in which the inner being of the believer became one with that of the god. In some cases, the deity involved was the *gad* – an ancient Semitic term for 'God' which survives in Arabic usage in its original sense of 'special favour, grace'. In this respect alone, apart from others, Christianity is clearly a latter-day form of a Semitic tradition of immemorial antiquity.

The discipline of anthropology has developed ways and means to investigate how particular religious notions had their origins. The discipline of history can pursue the development of these notions from one stage to another, provided there are records or other discernible traces to follow. In both cases, the discipline of linguistics is of paramount importance, and a thorough acquaintance of the historical geography involved is indispensable. Archaeology can also be eminently useful. However, with respect to the validity of the given religious notion at its own level, none of these disciplines can have much to say. This is the boundary they cannot legitimately overstep.

In most ancient mystery religions, the distinction was made between Initiates and non-Initiates. The first were the select group who 'received' the inner secrets of the cult and could properly interpret its special 'signs' relating to the divine 'favour'. They alone knew the meaning or meanings involved in the mystery. Unless the non-Initiates were intelligent enough to grasp these meanings by themselves, the mystery to them remained no more than a superstition – a medley of irrational beliefs and notions reflecting the natural human fear of the unknown, and the instinct to guard against the unpredictable by such practices as the interpretation of omens, or the making of charms. To promote their own power and maintain religious discipline at the non-Initiate level, the Initiates normally saw to it that the interpretation of omens and making of charms was turned into a monopoly reserved

for a professional priesthood. In the hands of a conscientious priest whose intent was to guide people rather than deceive them by encouraging their superstitions, this monopoly could be exercised with discretion. Not all priests, however, were conscientious.

The mystery of the religion, as understood by the Initiates, was far from nonsensical. What it involved was the recognition of a fundamental existential reality or set of realities which cannot reasonably be invalidated on the grounds that they happen not to be historical. What applies to the ancient mystery religions in this respect equally applies to Christianity. What if the mythological god Jesus who originally took human form, died and rose from death was not the Son of David who died on the cross in Jerusalem? When all is said and done, can this historical fact – granting that it is a fact– in any way reduce the sublimity of the eternal meanings which faithful Christians understand from the sign of the cross? To the cynical, they can; but cynicism is the cheapest form of intelligence. And in any case, few historians would dare to claim that historical reality – rarely more than a theoretical supposition – is the ultimate reality a person can understand.

Yet, given the many faculties of our human minds, we have to use them to understand things at their different levels. We possess the ability to investigate the truth of the past, and it would be wrong not to employ it. So, in the preceding chapters, we undertook a historical investigation of the Jesus question, as many others have done before. Our purpose was not to shed doubt on the validity of Christianity as a faith, but simply to determine the facts of the case to the degree that this was possible. The question of the Gospel Jesus as history has always been there, and will not leave us alone. Among the many books written about Jesus in our own times, some have been serious investigations attempting, like ours, to get at the historical truth of the matter. In others, the historical method has been deliberately misused to create fictional sensation and scandal. Even in the more serious investigations, the conclusions have often been highly speculative. In ours, we tried as far as possible to limit ourselves to the givens, which are the contents of the Gospel texts, except

that we may have looked at them in some instances more closely than others have done before.

People with equal or better scholarly training and experience may agree or disagree with our findings. To do so is the right and privilege of any person willing to make the effort. Christians who are uncertain of the power of their faith would be enraged by any historical investigation of the Jesus question, whoever the investigator may be. As they act with determination to defend their convictions, however, they must be prepared to reckon with historians who may be equally determined to defend the prerogatives of their discipline.

Some historians may suffer from the delusion that it is the prerogative of history to rule on the validity or non-validity of religious beliefs and practices, which actually belong to an entirely different realm. Should they act at any time in accordance with this delusion, they will richly deserve any reprimand they get. On the other hand, unless they manage to provide convincing answers to all the questions which mankind has asked since the beginning of human existence, they cannot justly claim that nothing truly meaningful lies beyond the jigsaw pieces of factual reality, which is the most that the historian - even with the mind's thousand eyes – can ever hope to see.

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